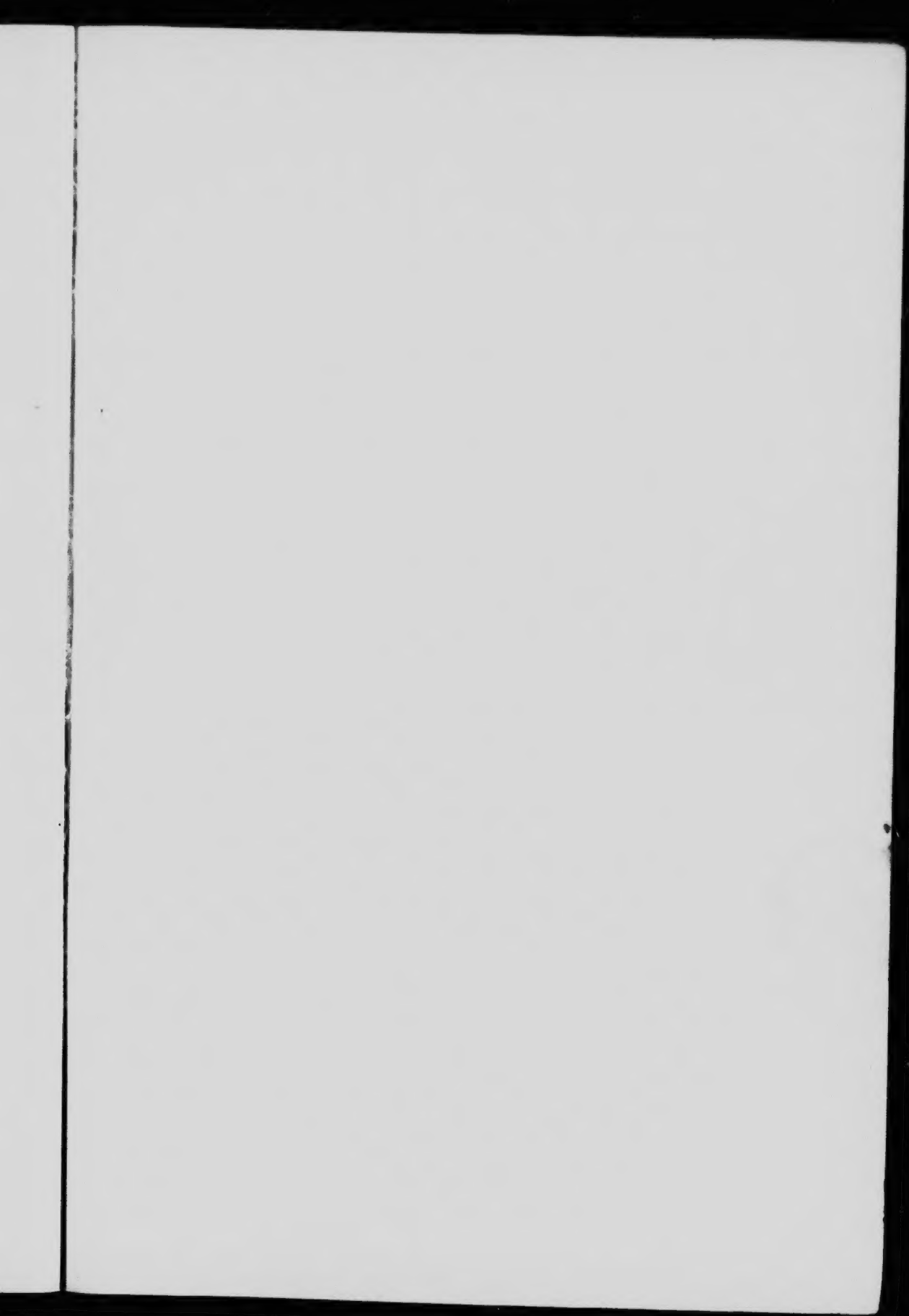


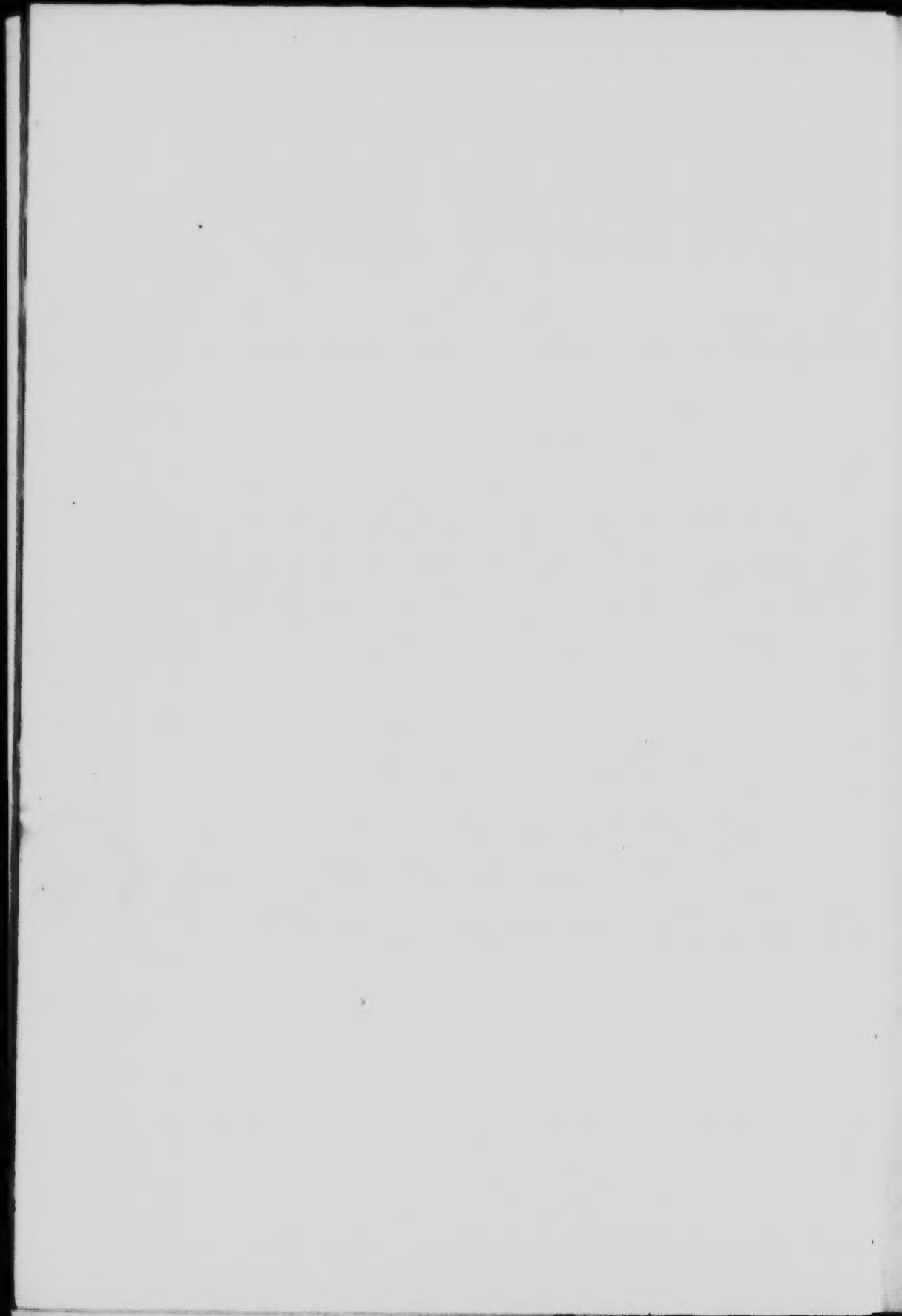
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STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY





WHY DON'T YOU TAKE ME? (p. 277)

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

BY

HARRY HERBERT KNIBBS

EDITED BY

W. H. B. L. L. L.

THE CORP. OF LIMITED



W. C. C. C.

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

BY

HARRY HERBERT KNIBBS

ILLUSTRATED BY

H. WESTON TAYLOR

THE COPP CLARK COMPANY LIMITED

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**TO
MY MOTHER**

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From drawings by H. Weston Taylor.



STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

CHAPTER I

THE GUM-PICKER

A CANADA JAY, swooping through a solitude of tall, Northern timber-spruce, alighted with a shrill clattering on a bough above the bark-shingled roof of the gum-picker's shack. Smoke from a smouldering birch-log fire hung inert in the upper branches, intensifying the gloom of the unawakened forest. The early sun burned slowly through the pool of smoke and spread a soft, palpitating radiance on the open front of the shack.

A vociferous yawn, the audible click of sleep-stiffened joints stretched in awakening, a gray-stockinged foot protruding from the inner darkness, and the jay bounced from the low bough and flashed to a higher perch. The bird cocked a beady eye at the solitary foot, with alert suspicion in the slant of his head.

Presently a nasal voice chanted, in a tuneless, quavering minor, altogether at variance with the warful sentiment of the ditty:—

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"Come, all ye bold Free River boys,
And listen to my song:
I'll sing to you a ditty,
I won't detain you long.
It's all about a man called Hope —"

The singer paused. The Canada jay, still stiffly at attention, cocked his other eye —

"Who surely is no good.
He goes araound a-bossin' folks,
Instead of choppin' wood."

A head thatched with a mat of rusty red hair poked stealthily from the shack. The scanty features of a weather-hardened face stretched in a gap-toothed grin. The fixity of momentary resolution overcame the grin. The gum-picker drew back a lean shank and kicked a piece of driftwood into the fire, scratched his head, and continued:—

"He's boss down to the lumber-camp,
But he ain't boss of me;
For he's the biggest square-head
In this dear land of the free."

Then he pawed the air with his gnarled, uplifted hand, marking time to an actual but irresolute inspiration. Clenching his fist he droned:—

"One time he come a-pokin' daown
To Slink Peters's shack —"

The gum-picker's other hand, clutching at the

THE GUM-PICKER

air, finally seemed to snatch the dangling end of his ditty and knot it to the climax —

“But if he comes daown here *ag'in* —
He surely won't go back.”

“'T ain't finished yit!” he exclaimed. “But I'll learn her to Smooch Larkin down to camp. He'll get all the fellas singin' her, an' that'll make John Hope mad. That's where I get even.”

Subdued by an unpleasant recollection of a former experience with John Hope, he gazed dully at the river that gleamed in sun-dappled patches through the trees. Beside him in the lean-to lay a spotting-axe, near it a long pole shod at its smaller end with a round, sharp-edged steel cup, a stained and wrinkled canvas bag, and a tattered and limp pack-sack. These, with the blankets on which he squatted, comprised his meagre outfit. Incidental to the outfit, a wholesome-looking jug, with a peeled stick thrust through the handle, stood in one corner. The jug was filled with undeniably unwholesome “whiskey blanc.”

With the satisfaction of one who has done sweating justice to an imperative and trying obligation, this singer in the wilderness drew a loose sleeve across his forehead and relaxed his angular frame. He eyed the jug and frowned.

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"Toted you clean from Burnt Creek City, and there you be, squattin' jest as fat and sarsified-lookin' as I'd be if I was as full as you be. But I ain't, and it ain't right! No, sir, it ain't right!"

He grasped the jug and, balancing it on one crooked arm, tilted his head. Then he lowered the jug and shook it.

"Swashes a leetle," he said, his Adam's apple working up and down after its prolonged suspension. "But I'll fix *that*."

He assembled his length of limb and arose, stretching and blinking in the sun. Grabbing a cup he filled it at the river and returned.

"There, now!" he exclaimed, shaking the jug. "You're full ag'in and I'm feelin' some better myself."

He squatted with a satisfied air, in the front of the shack. In his artificial content he delayed getting breakfast. Instead, he lit a sawed-off lumberjack's pipe and puffed reflectively.

"Pickin' gum's slow, and moughty lonesome-like. Now, the insides of that there jug is worth a month's pickin' of gum. Over to Hope's camp them fellas is good for three dollars a quart, and there's three gallon of 'hold-me-stiddy' in that jug, mebbby."

One of his eyes, as lustreless as pale-blue kal-

THE GUM-PICKER

somine, closed in a slow wink. The other, seemingly independent of its mate, gazed about inquisitively, challenging contradiction. Then his puckered eyelid slowly relaxed. Under the mellowing influence of his recent adjustment, his heart warmed in sympathy for himself.

"Don't see what John Hope's got to do, botherin' of me as ain't hurtin' nobody. Said if he ketched me sellin' liquor to his men ag'in, he 'd bust my neck."

The idea seemed displeasing. He groped in his fuddled consciousness for a happier thought.

"It ain't busted *yit!*" he explained, the astounding discovery lighting his shallow eyes with exaggerated joy. "And it ain't a-goin' to be, nuther." With meandering loquacity he continued: "It's a *good* neck." As there was no one to contradict him, he asserted boldly: "It's a *honest* neck." Then, with an absoluteness of finality that seemed to preclude further argument, even with himself: "An' it's *my* neck. 'T ain't John Hope's." With this satisfying conclusion he rubbed the seamed and wrinkled stretch back of his ears. A maudlin tear slid down the weathered creases of his face. He dug his fist in his eye abstractedly, his emotional equilibrium teetering between the depths and solid ground like a log poised on the end of a skidway. He gathered his long legs toward him

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and arose to his six feet of loose-jointed awkwardness.

"I'd like to see the man what says it ain't!" He paused. "Ain't—what?" he asked himself in a perplexed tone. His rising courage had swept him beyond the main issue, but that made no difference.

"Jest fetch that man here what says it ain't—ain't— Jest fetch him; John Hope, or any other fella!"

The clump of caulked boots back of the lean to did not interrupt his tirade. He was completely absorbed in an imaginary scuffle. A short, muscular figure, clad in lumberman's garb, stepped round the corner of the shack and stood listening to the monologue. Finally the figure shied its little round felt hat at the gum-picker's back. The hat, skimming above the gum-picker's head, dropped in front of him. He jumped backward and eyed it with suspicion. Then he looked up in the trees as if expecting a deluge of similar headgear.

"I know that hat," he said finally. "That's Looie Britt's hat— Looie's *ole* hat, 'cause it's got a holt in it."

He moved round the crumpled felt, apparently for closer inspection and saw the hatless figure from the corner of his eye.

THE GUM-PICKER

"Nex' thing," he went on, "Looie Britt 'll be comin' down here pertendin' he 's lookin' for that hat, an' thinkin' Slink Peters has a jug of whiskey. But he ain't. No, he ain't got a drop."

"Come out of it, Slink," said Britt, stepping forward. "Trot out the jug. I'm in a hurry."

"Fu'st time sence I knowed you, Looie. How much?"

Britt crooked his elbow and dug a lonely bill from his pocket.

"Quart," he replied. "Get a move on! Ole man Hope's been hangin' around camp all mornin', keepin' quiet, — too dum' quiet to suit me."

"That so?" queried Peters, drawing a bottle from beneath the blankets and filling it through a birch-bark funnel.

"Yes," replied Britt. "And you better hide that jug. If he ketches you ag'in, Slink, — well, you know what the ole man is when he b'iles over." Britt extended an opened hand. "Here's the dough."

Peters, mumbling, stuffed the bill into his pocket. Suddenly his lean, weasel face lengthened. His mouth opened in a futile effort to speak.

"What's ailin' you now —" Britt turned his head, following the gum-picker's gaze.

With his square hands on his hips, and his

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square shoulders braced in an effort to control the anger that burned in his broad face, stood John Hope, of the Hope-Townsend lumber camps. Peters, living up to his nickname, drifted behind Britt and endeavored to hide the jug under the blankets. Britt cocked his hat over one eye in open defiance of his employer. John Hope's straight lips twisted in a peculiar smile. Britt knew what usually followed that smile, but Hope made no movement — said nothing. His steady glare and his silence finally overcame Britt's nerve. With a tingling from ears to heels he swung up the bottle and hurled it at that square, blazing face.

John Hope ducked his head behind a crooked arm. The bottle whizzed and struck with a jangling crash on the river-edge. The old lumberman strode forward as Britt, backing into the shack, grabbed the spotting-axe and swung it up. Slink crouched behind him, waiting for an opportunity to dive out and run.

Hope raised a steady forefinger to Britt's face. "Drop that axe and go back to camp!"

Britt lowered his arm. "I don't know what's to hinder me from stayin' here if I like it. I reckon I'm fired, but that ain't sayin' you own the earth."

"No, I don't," said Hope, his fingers relaxing and a kindlier expression twinkling in his eyes.

THE GUM-PICKER

"Louis, you're too good a man to be wasting your time at this game. You go back to camp. Peters is the man I want to talk to."

"I ain't done nuthin'," whined the gum-picker.

Britt, in his unwashed ignorance, misjudged his employer's change of front. The boss had caught him red-handed and let him off with a word. A shallow contempt surged in Britt's narrow mind. He could not forgive the sting of Hope's forgiveness.

"I warned you once before," said Hope sternly, addressing Peters. "Now, hand over that jug and I'll call it square."

"It's mine," said Peters, gaining courage as Hope's manner suggested a willingness to compromise.

"I'm not robbing you, Peters. I'm just protecting my men and my interests, and I've got to have that jug."

"Don't know as I need any of your protectin'," growled Britt, anxious to assert his attitude of independence.

John Hope, containing his righteous anger, made no reply. He brushed past Britt and stepped in to seize the jug, which had been uncovered by Slink's dodging.

"Looie — Looie Britt, you goin' to see your ole friend Slink git robbed and say nothin'?"

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"That's a-tween you and him," replied Britt, feigning indifference.

As the old lumberman stooped, Britt signaled to the gum-picker. With a rush they were on Hope, sagging him to his knees. Bewildered by the sudden attack, he swayed back and forth, finally flinging Britt against the side of the shack, but the gum-picker, his long legs wound around Hope's body, clung like a cat. As Slink and the old lumberman heaved and twisted, Britt got to his feet and circling the men finally drew up his foot and planted the long, tearing caulks on Hope's jaw. Twenty ragged holes gleamed in bright dots that commingled and trickled to the ground.

Maddened by the dastardly attack, Hope flung the gum-picker from him and rushed at Britt.

"Spike me, will you!" he bellowed.

Like whirling stones his broad thick fists crashed again and again through Britt's upraised arms, battering his head back. Suddenly Britt turned and ran.

John Hope, drawing his sleeve across his bleeding face, turned just in time to catch Peters's arm as the latter swung up the light spotting-axe.

"You're crazy," he gasped. "Quit it! I don't want to kill you."

Peters dropped the axe as Hope twisted his

THE GUM-PICKER

arm. Maddened by terror, his lips working over his bared teeth, he flung himself on the lumberman's heaving shoulders, snapping like a wolf. Hope jumped back, luring the other to the open in a blind endeavor to give the gum-picker an opportunity to run, but Peters made a second wild rush and bore Hope down. The gum-picker, snarling, bit at Hope, who flung up his arm to shield his face. Then came a crunch and a spirt of red sprayed in his eyes. He groaned and a black rage blinded him. He felt himself twist from beneath the writhing shape, felt his hands grip a gaunt, sinewy neck, and jerk the head forward . . .

Then tree after tree stood out, each clean-cut brown shaft running smoothly up to the dusky green roof of gently moving branches. A mask-like blur of gray-green lichen loomed boldly from the background of a rotting stump. Below it lay the twisted length of the gum-picker.

Staggering backward, Hope bound his handkerchief round his mangled wrist.

"Slink!" he called; "Slink Peters!"

Then he stooped and turned the blind face sideways, gazing at the oozing clot on the back of the gum-picker's head.

"Murder!" he whispered, his face a mottled mask round his burning eyes. "Murder! So

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help me God, I did n't know — I did n't mean *that*."

He glanced furtively through the woods and started as a spruce partridge whizzed overhead with thrumming wings. Again he stooped and lifted the limp shoulders.

"Peters!" he cried. "Peters! Great God, man, I did n't know —"

Finally, with one shaking hand held before him, he stepped from the glaring sun-patch round the lean-to and disappeared in the cool shadows of the noonday forest.

CHAPTER II

"BURN!"

LOUIS BRITT, running along the trail toward the camps, stopped suddenly, and half turned as though to retrace his steps. Then, cursing, he settled to a sullen stride that brought him within the next half-hour, to the clearing round the wangan. He slouched past the office door and entered the cook-room. Filling the basin near the door, he bathed his bruised face, deliberately ignoring the questions of the cook, one "Smooch" Larkin, who finally became irritated by the other's silence and hinted at the liberty any of the men took who used the sacred precincts of the cook's quarters as a "private bathroom" without first asking permission.

"I'll 'permission' you!" retaliated Britt, turning a red-blotted countenance on the cook. "You jest listen to *me*."

His imagination, fired to the pitch of insanity, quickly invented a gruesome story, which his bruised and battered face seemed to uphold.

"Smooch Larkin," he began with unusual so-

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lemnity, "they's been murder done this day, an' right before my own eyes."

He paused, that this might have its full weight with the pop-eyed cook.

"Murder!" reiterated Britt, launching at once upon his recitation. "I was down to Slink Peters's shack, jest sayin' 'howdy' when along comes the ole man, uglier than a sick bull an' lays on to Slink an' come dum nigh killin' him *then*, if I hadn't jumped in an' held him back. Look at my face! That's what I get for tryin' to help poor ole Slink from bein' killed. Then the ole man turns on *me* — an' I reckon he's clean crazy by then — an' I fit 'im long as I could fight a human, but he got the best of me. Then he turns in and does fer Slink. Seen him with m' own eyes. *Does* fer him, understan'? There Slink is, layin' cold and dead under them trees" (Britt's imagination soared to a sentimental crisis) "an' his pore ole mother 'll never see 'im ag'in."

"He ain't got no mother," volunteered the awe-stricken "Smooch."

"It's jest the same as," said Britt. "He had one oncet, didn't he?"

This logic puzzled "Smooch," who switched to the main issue.

"You say John Hope done fer Slink? You sure?"

BURN!

"D' you reckon I'd be comin' in here, private, and tellin' of it if it warn't so?"

Again the cook's obese mind failed to entertain anything but the self-sufficient compliment implied by the word "private." Of course it must be so.

"And what next?"

"Next — h-m-m — next is fer you to keep your trap shut till I get my 'time' cashed an' get down to Burnt Creek City an' — notify the aut'orities," concluded Britt impressively. "You wait till the saw gang commences to come in, and then you tell 'em what I tole to you. Reckon then you'll git even with 'im."

"I ain't got nuthin' to git even with John Hope fer. He never done nuthin' to *me*," said Smooch.

"Ain't done nuthin' to you? An' mebbby you call killin' a pore innercent gum-picker 'doin' nuthin' to nobody'?"

"That's right," replied the cook. "They's got to be law in these here woods or we're all likely to be killed 'most any minute. I'll tell the boys when they come in. I'll tell 'em! But say, Looie, is Slink sellin' liquor ag'in?"

"He ain't — that I knows of. But that don't make no difference."

"That's right," said the cook, swelling with the importance of his trust.

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"You keep it under your hat till I get started fer Burnt Creek, Smooch. We'll show 'em! This here's a free country, I reckon."

And Britt clumped from the cook-room and on out toward the office.

The Canada jay, flitting back to the lean-to, dropped to his recent perch. Below lay the quiet shape with one open palm half-filled with dead spruce needles. With a shrill of fear the bird suddenly swooped upward and vanished as the limp hand closed weakly and then relaxed.

Louis Britt, stooping and peering round a corner of the shack, cautiously looked in, drew back, and gazed about. "The ole man's gone," he muttered, "and the jug's there. Wonder where Slink—" His speculative glance fell on the inert figure at the foot of the stump. He stepped to it and touched it with his boot. "Hey, Slink, come out of it! He's gone." He leaned forward and looked at the gum-picker's face. "Mebby he's foxin'. N-n-o-o-, I reckon not. By Crumbs! I guess the ole man did do fer Slink and no makin' it up. God! but he's a hum-dinger when he gits started." He brought water and dashed it on the mute, upturned face. "Now, I'm all kinds of a sick duck—an' add one," he exclaimed as he went to the shack, filled a cup from the jug and

BURN!

returned to Peters. "W'iskey to burn, an' me tryin' *water*." He paused. "Burn!" he said. "Burn! That's her!"

He lifted Peters's head. "U-u-g-g-h!" He drew back his hand and wiped it on the leaves. Then he pried the set jaws apart. "Hey, Slink, it's w'iskey! Do you hear?"

The overdose of liquor bubbled between the gum-picker's white-edged lips. He coughed, drew up one knee and groaned.

"Hurray!" shouted Britt. "That's her!"

He lifted the limp shoulders and dragged the gum-picker to the shack. "Now you lay there fer a spell." Britt gazed about, walked to the river and glanced up and down the shingle. "He's got a canoe hid around here somewheres," he said as he poked along shore. Finally he found the boat, covered with withered spruce boughs, and beneath it a warped paddle. He loaded into the canoe the outfit he had gotten together at the camp. Spreading a blanket in the bottom of the craft he dragged the gum-picker to the river-side and, after much grunting labor, stretched him beneath the thwarts. "Now fer the finish!" And an ugly grin seamed his tanned face. He poured some whiskey on the browse bed in the lean-to, touched a match to it, and watched the lapping flames ripple up the sun-dried walls.

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"She looks purty. Wish't Slink could see her."

A long flame lipped the edge of the bark roof and lifted to the boughs overhead, crisping them with a raw hiss as it ringed a tree and climbed skyward. The hiss grew to a crackling that spread to a soft roar as the resinous trees blackened in the ascending flames. Britt stepped into the canoe and paddled quickly upstream.

CHAPTER III

OUTLAWED

BRENT TOWNSEND, junior partner in the Hope-Townsend Lumber Company, sat in the wangan office checking the clerk's time-sheet. He paused and, dotting his lead-pencil against a name, turned the pencil round and round, drilling a tiny hole through the yellow paper. "Too bad," he said, talking to himself. "Too bad John's temper gets a . . y with him so often. Now there's Tim Porter, best man on the drive we got." Townseld's long, weathered face was turned toward the busy clerk. "Johnny," he said, "what was the row between John and Tim Porter?"

The clerk glanced up, hesitated, and then a smile of understanding brightened his sallow face.

"Same thing," he replied. "Tim got canned over to Slink Peters's shack and come back look-in' for trouble. The old man let him have it out and fired him next morning."

Townsend nodded. He ran his pencil down

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

the long list of names. Again he paused, drilling the pencil through the paper.

"Tom Geroux?"

"Same thing," replied the clerk.

"Sam Rawley?"

The clerk nodded.

Townsend, mumbling, continued to check the list.

"Stevens — Thomas — Wane — Wagstaff —?"

"The whole bunch," said the clerk.

"John means right," said Townsend. "We've tried to stop this liquor business before and we could n't. He ought to know we're not running a W. C. T. U., especially just before the drive. He's let out some of the best rivermen we got. That man Peters ought to go to jail, but we have n't time, with the drive right on top of us, to monkey with him. Too bad, though. I ought to stayed up here and let John go down to Burnt Creek last month. Somehow I can get along with most of the boys when they're drinkin'."

The clerk nodded and glanced out of the window. "Brent," he said, addressing his superior with the usual familiarity of the backwoods, "the old man caught Peters up here, more than a month ago, and he shook him up some. Got mad when the boys sided in with Slink and said

OUTLAWED

he 'd kill him if he ketched him sellin' booze again. Slink said he 'd go to law —"

Townsend laughed. "Go to law! That's good. John would 't kill a fly when he 's got hold of his temper. But he don't know how strong he is. He hates liquor just as much as I do, but he makes more fuss, and that just suits the boys."

"He 's kind of tied his hands for goin' after Slink again — sayin' he 'd kill him. If the old man did let go and suthin' happened to Slink, it would look kind of bad, his sayin' that and a bunch of the boys hearin' him."

"Yes," said Townsend, pushing the timesheet across the table. "We need every man we 've got and more, too, till the drive 's in. Wish we had Jean DuBois with us this spring. Where 'd he go when he quit last year?"

"Over Pleasant Lake way, so I heard. Heard he 's trappin' up there."

"Good man," said Townsend, rising. "Hello! I was just goin' out to look for you, John. Why — what 's up?"

John Hope, closing the door behind him, sank to the long bench across the end of the office. His face was white round the ragged wounds made by the caulks and he held his injured wrist across his chest.

"I 've done it this time, Brent," he said, look-

ing up at Townsend with desperate eyes. "My God! Brent, I killed him."

"Johnny," said Townsend quietly, "go in the wangan and check up that stuff for Larkin."

The clerk arose and stepped into the storehouse.

Townsend strode quickly to his partner. "John, what's the matter? Killed who?"

"Peters," said Hope, thrusting out his wrist. "He and Britt jumped me. I was after the liquor. Peters went crazy — bit me."

"Peters?" Townsend drew back a step. "Why did n't you let me handle Peters? This thing's goin' to raise hell with us. And there's fifty men ready to swear you said you'd do him. You better get Johnny here to paddle you to Burnt Creek and tell Scott how it happened. Where's Britt?"

"Don't know," replied Hope, shaking his head.

"But how did you come to do it?" asked Townsend, after a pause.

Slowly the old man told the story of the fight, reiterating the fact that he had intended nothing further than seizing the whiskey, until they had taken him off his guard.

"John," said Townsend gravely, "I know what you are, but the men don't. And you're not exactly popular with them. It looks bad. But don't you forget, John, that I'll stick to you till the finish. How long since you left Peters?"

OUTLAWED

"Mebby two hours," replied Hope.

About to reply, Townsend was interrupted by the clerk who appeared in the wangan doorway.

"I forgot to tell you, Brent, that Looie Britt's got his time. Would n't say nothin' about why he was quittin' 'cept he said he was through with lumberin'."

Hope started to his feet.

Then Townsend asked quietly, "Did Britt say where he was goin'?"

"Said he was goin' down to Burnt Creek," replied the clerk.

The partners glanced at each other. "All right, Johnny," said Townsend. "You go ahead and check up that stuff."

Hope sat down wearily. Townsend, pacing restlessly back and forth in front of him, talked in a subdued tone. Hope infrequently made answer, or asked a question.

Finally the clerk again appeared. "Finished?" he said interrogatively.

"Get your canoe, Johnny, and be ready to paddle up to Free River Settlement in about half an hour." The clerk nodded and slipping on his coat stepped out of the room. Hope lifted a querulous face to his partner, but the answer on Townsend's lips was checked by a babble of voices and the tramp of hurrying feet. "Step into the

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

other room, John," said Townsend, "and don't show yourself till I call you."

At the door Townsend met the men, barring their evident intention of entering with his lank body slouching naturally in the doorway.

"Where is he?" cried a lean-jawed lumberjack.

"That's her! Where is he?" growled his companions.

"Mebby he's down to Slink's," suggested one.

"Mebby he's drowndin' the body in the river," suggested another.

"After your time-checks, boys?" said Townsend easily.

"No. We're after the ole man. He's killed Slink Peters!" came in an excited chorus.

"Killed Peters? The gum-picker?" Townsend's look of surprise was masterly.

"That's right!" volleyed the men.

"How do you know that?" asked Townsend.

"Why, Smooch, here —"

Townsend whirled on Smooch Larkin. "How do *you* know it?"

"Why, Looie Britt —"

Townsend's gaunt form stiffened. "You're a pack of nursin' kids. You ain't *men*. Have you *seen* Peters — or Britt?"

OUTLAWED

With a muttering some of the men turned away in indecision. At that moment Townsend, looking over their heads, saw a spirt of flame glancing between the trees toward the point.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Now I'll tell you something you *can* see for yourselves." He raised his arm and pointed toward the river. Through the trees ran a welt of raw flame and above it flickering cinders sped birdlike through the smoke. "The South Fork's on fire, and it'll likely wipe us out."

With a roar the men tumbled across the clearing to the camps.

"South Fork's on fire all right," said Townsend, still standing in the doorway; "and it's bad — but I guess it saved our bacon, at that."

"You heard 'em?" he said, entering the wangan and calling to Hope. "Well, John, I guess you'd better let Johnny paddle you up to Free River Settlement. Jean DuBois is up there somewhere, trapping, and he's a friend of yours, if you've got two. You better hang out with him a spell till this thing blows over some. They won't be so ready to swear your name away six months from now. They're red-hot now and you know what a Burnt Creek jury would do to you. I'll go see Bob Scott and talk to him just before I send word to you to come out again."

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Then without a word of farewell he caught up an axe and ran after the men.

All night the shanty-boys labored with axe, mattock, and shovel, slashing out the underbrush and trenching across the point between the fire and the main camp. Former experience in fire-fighting, a windless night, and loyalty to Townsend saved the main buildings.

On the upper reaches of Free River, when the forest round Peters's shack was a blind pit of roaring white, a canoe slipped silently past the solitary light spotting the shadowy bulk of Free River Settlement.

"Shut up!" whispered Britt, poking Slink with his paddle. "If you got to *sing*, wait till we git where we 're goin'."

But Peters, heedless in his delirium of anything save the insistent, dull thumping in his head, knew that if he ceased his chant, that broad, bleeding face would come too close and then —

"Come — all — ye bold — Free River boys —
An' — listen to — my song —"

he quavered.

Britt glanced over his shoulder at the diminishing white dot in the blanket of night. "Now, sing, if you got to," he growled.

From the bow of the canoe, and trailing dis-

OUTLAWED

mally over the darkness of the hushed river came the monotonous minor of the ditty Britt lifted his paddle and listened.

"But if he — comes daown here — ag'in . . .
. . . He surely won't go back."

Britt laughed. "Slink," he said, "I'm thinkin' you don't know it, but mebby you're right, old socks. If he *did* skin out, he surely won't come back."

CHAPTER IV

THE NIGHT

THE dew-heavy leaves of the dull-yellow poplars twinkled like frosted silver as the light breeze lifted their under-edges, palpitating in the soft radiance of the summer moon. White birches, with shreds and tatters of loose bark whispering in the night, loomed intermittently through the half-light, like ghostly monuments to the departed pines and spruce that had fallen beneath the axe-strokes of the lumbermen. The silence was eloquent with suggestions of sound and motion as the invisible forest kindred, soft-footed and shrinking, moved in the shadows, themselves seemingly but palpable shadows of living creatures. The forest, mysterious always in its brooding solemnity, and doubly mysterious in the gloom of night, breathed of its ancient days when nought but the soundless tread of the lynx, the wolf, the skin-clad native and his stealthy brothers, passed through its shadowy reaches; the hunted and the hunter of a vanished age. Where the lynx once prowled, the timid rabbit

THE NIGHT

wer' unscathed, and the wolf had passed into history. The red man now inhabited the settlements, and when he hunted, it was along worn trails.

But in its heart of hearts the wilderness still held a fastness that few men had journeyed to. Beyond the quiet shores of Free River, and a day's journey eastward, lay the great granite-bedded ridge or height-of-land from which one might see the faint, threadlike course of Whisper River as it plunged and tumbled through a straight-walled gorge to find the placid level of Whisper Lake.

Down in the birches, and hardly distinguishable from the black bulk of the pine stump near him, stood John Hope. The moonlight glistened on the buckle of the pack-sack at his feet. A few yards in front of him lay the somnolent river, soundless, black-bordered with shadows, and gleaming softly where the moon touched its mid-stream course. Across from his waiting-place, the cabin lights twinkled in the dusk of the clearing round Free River Settlement. Voices came faintly over the water and he listened, stooping forward and straining his gaze as though to pierce the wall of night. A canoe gritted on the baked mud of the landing and a paddle, striking against its side, sent a roll of sound over

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the waters. Then came the soft "swish" of regular paddle-strokes, and it seemed less than a minute from when he had heard the canoe launched, and its shadowy outline pushed toward the birch-lined shore. Hope shrunk back in the gloom and waited breathlessly.

Then a voice, low and deep, breathed rather than spoke the words: "Ah'm come — eet ees Jean."

"You, Jean?" queried Hope.

"Oui. Johnnay he say to moi dat' you wan' Beeg Jean — an' — Ah come."

"Did he tell you —"

"Oui — Ah know h'all dat w'at he say." And the big Frenchman stepped from the canoe. "Dat ees wan bad t'ing w'at dat Sleenk Petaire he get, but Ah haf' wan place w'ere dey don' fin' you, Ah t'ink."

Silently Hope came to the river-edge and dropping his pack in the boat, stepped in and sat down. Without a word the Frenchman shoved the canoe into deep water and paddled northward through the night. In an hour they had reached the farther shadows of the opposite shore, several miles above the settlement. Here the Frenchman shipped his paddle, and, grasping the long setting-pole, shoved the canoe through a shallow cove of whispering reeds.

THE NIGHT

"Your camp, Jean?" asked Hope after a long silence.

"Non. We go dere firs' an' Ah get de t'ing for dat Whispaire Lac. Dey fin' you een mah cabane, but dey don' fin' you on dat lac."

"But Whisper River — we can't run that. No one has ever run that river."

"Hah! You t'ink dat? Ah go eento dat lac een dees leet' canoe one, two, t'ree taime, mabbe. Ah run heem all right."

Again Hope became silent. His wounded wrist throbbed and his swollen face ached in the night air, but he was only half-conscious of the pain. The thought of what he had done, and the thought of what he was doing in running away from the consequences of his act, crowded out all detail of plan for the future. He was adrift in his despondency.

Presently he turned to Jean, and said over his shoulder: "Jean, I did it, but I did n't mean to do it. I had to take care of myself. When we get into the lake, I want you to go straight to Brent Townsend — and he 'll arrange for my keep. Then you must go to Burnt Creek City and talk to Arlis. She 'll be about crazy when she hears of it. You 'll go, won't you, Jean?"

"Oui. Ah go. Ah tell Mees Arlees dat Ah tak' care hof you all right."

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"My God, Jean!" exclaimed Hope, as he again thought of his daughter. "My God! it's— it's— Did *you* ever kill a man?"

"Non" came from the stern of the canoe as the Frenchman swung to the pole and pushed the boat up a little stream entering the foot of Pleasant Lake, the headwaters of Free River. "But dose mans dey keel moi eef you don' come dat taime w'en Ah make vite weet dem. You sauf' ma life dat taime — an' Beeg Jean he don' forget dat."

"Six years ago," muttered Hope. "Arlis was a little girl then. I remember, Jean. Slink Peters was one of the men that tried to down you that time, at Burnt Creek."

"Dat Sleenk he wan bad mans. Ah t'ink eet ees bon dat you feex heem."

About to reply, Hope started, as some animal, swimming close to the canoe, dove with a splash. The woods had never, until this night, held terror for him. But now he was as a child in the dark, trembling at the least noise and utterly unnerved.

When they landed at the head of the stream, Hope hesitated before following the Frenchman along the dim trail that led to his cabin.

"I don't like this, Jean," he said, as the other shouldered his pack. "I think—I'd better go back and face it."

THE NIGHT

"You come back sometaime, oui. But Ah t'ink laik Johnnay and Mo'sieur Townsen', dat you wait for a leet' taimе firs'."

"Brent said so." And he stumped after the Frenchman, who seemed gifted with the sight of a night-bird in his ability to follow a trail that even Hope, thorough woodsman as he was, could not discern.

The invisible trail wound upward over the hardwood ridges and then down to a swamp-edged spring circled by dwarfed cedars. DuBois stopped at the spring and offered the birch-bark dipper to Hope, who drank hurriedly. A few paces from the spring they came to the cabin—Big Jean's isolated home from which he hunted and trapped, and to which few knew the trail. John Hope, worn with the stress of his fear, refused the simple meal that the Frenchman prepared for him, and, stripping off his coat and moccasins, crept into the bunk, to lie throughout the night, sleepless and feverish with the dread of the guilty.

The pallid light of the early morning found him gazing, red-eyed and pale, at the open door, through which he saw a deer come to the spring to drink. He was about to speak to DuBois, who was snoring in the bunk opposite, when he saw

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the deer lift its head and gaze directly at the cabin. Something in the wide, gentle eyes of the creature stirred the frozen current of his emotions. His shoulders shook and he turned his face to the cabin wall. He had been on the point of waking DuBois, that he might shoot the animal and so have fresh meat for their journey. But the thought of killing even a dumb creature was, strangely enough, more than even his rugged nature could bear.

"I wish he had killed me," he muttered. "I wish he had."

CHAPTER V

AT BURNT CREEK CITY

THE north-bound express, forty minutes late, hurled its glistening, olive-brown length of Pullmans through the high-walled cut below Burnt Creek City. The heavy coaches, recovering from the grinding jolt of the sharp curve beyond the cut, rocked drunkenly. The train, half a length beyond the "block," eased to a standstill in the whirling cinder-dust of the roadbed. With the clash of hurriedly opened vestibules the porters, still clad in their white service jackets, leaned grinning from the train as it backed slowly to the station. As the white-coated figures sprang actively down, suggesting in their mechanical dexterity a bobbing row of wire-operated marionettes, a girl stepped from the rear car to the broad level of the station platform. Behind her a tall young fellow was asking the name of the station as she tipped the bowing porter.

"Bu'nt Creek City, boss," said the porter.
"Taylohvile next. You said Taylohvile?"

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"Oh, Burnt Creek will do," said the young man, descending the car steps.

A brass-buttoned sleeve glinted in the morning sun and along the train ran the clang and clatter of closing vestibules. The girl turned to pick up the suitcase at her feet as the porter of the rear coach swung to the steps of the slowly moving train.

"My grip!" she exclaimed, turning in dismay to the man who had asked the name of the station. "He's forgotten it."

The stranger, nodding, dropped his own suitcase and, sprinting after the train, bowled into the astonished porter as the latter stooped to close the steps. "I'll get it!" he cried, waving to her from the rear platform of the Pullman.

She saw him disappear in the darkened oblong of the doorway, even as the train rounded a curve and left behind it a black strip of shimmering emptiness above which the palpitating heat-waves of the July morning wavered over the polished rails.

"Well, there's my trunk, at least," she said, as a baggage truck lumbered past. "And I gave that stupid porter twenty-five cents."

She paced nervously up and down the platform, heedless of the curious glances of the habitués of the station. Finally she stopped and read the

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little leather-tagged label on the stranger's suitcase. "Stephen March, Vancouver, B. C."

Again resuming her walk, she soliloquized. "He did look like a Western man—but not like such a quick one." She smiled as she recalled his swift grip on the situation and almost simultaneously on the hand-rail of the Pullman. "He seemed actually lazy in the car this morning."

"Kerridge, Miss?"

"No, thank you," she replied as a nondescript "cabby," carrying the inevitable whip, saluted her. "But—yes. You may get my things. Here's the trunk-check. And wait a few minutes, please."

The cabby hobbled across to the baggage-room. Meanwhile as the express boomed through the echoing woodlands the man who seemed "actually lazy" was hustling the apologetic porter to the front end of the car where he found the missing grip. After a brief and distinct exchange of remarks with the porter, the young man hurried to the rear of the coach. Realizing the time-wasting futility of a request to have the express stopped this side of Taylorville, he grabbed the handle of the emergency air-brake and pulled it down.

With the squeal of the binding brake-shoes came a staggering jolt; a half-clothed apparition shot down the aisle in a dizzy attempt to grasp something solid; there came the smell of over-

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heated iron, and then an intense silence on which the quick throbbing of the distant engine broke intermittently. "Stephen March, Vancouver, B. C.," dropped from the Pullman, and without looking back walked quickly down the tracks toward Burnt Creek City.

A shout or two, a distinctly uncomplimentary qualification of his "nerve" by an irate conductor, and the train drifted away to a shimmering dot in the green lane of the forest.

The girl saw him coming down the track swinging the grip, and she walked along the platform to meet him.

"Oh, thank you," she said, with a gracious nod; "I was afraid you'd get carried to Taylorville."

"So was I," said the man, with more significance than the occasion seemed to warrant. "I did want to have a little talk with that porter, though. Here's your quarter."

"My quarter? Why—"

"Yes. The darky dug it up after he found your grip. Guess he was too scared to remember it, for we did hit that last curve kind of sideways. He must have been scared, to give up the two-bits. Maybe I did hurry him up a little."

She extended her hand gracefully and took the silver piece.

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Stephen March, gazing at her, said suddenly: "You're the first woman I've spoken to since I left Alaska."

"Yes?" and a heightened color tinged her cheeks. A trifle disconcerted by the frank admiration in his eyes, she motioned to the waiting cabman. But the stranger forestalled the cabby's limping approach by walking with her to the cab, where she again thanked him from its cool vantage.

"Just a minute," she said, as he raised his broad-brimmed hat. "Won't you please take this?" Laughing, she held the porter's relinquished silver piece toward him. "I can't keep it. I think it should be yours — by right of conquest."

About to reply hastily, he caught the twinkle of innocent fun in her brown eyes.

"Because," added the girl, "it's really nothing but a very little 'thank you, sir' from a very grateful girl."

"Yes," he said slowly. "I'll take it for a lucky piece."

As he stood watching the cab trundle to the corner and turn into the main street of the town, he turned the coin over in his fingers. He tossed it up and caught it.

"Heads, I'll strike Brent Townsend for a job."

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Tails, I'll hunt up Scotty." He glanced at the coin. "Tails it is. Wonder if she'd have given it to me, even in fun, if she knew I was broke — cold, stony broke?"

He recovered his suitcase and swung down the street. Presently he entered a hotel where he left his suitcase. In a few minutes he reappeared, walked leisurely across the road and sauntered along the sidewalk in the shade of the store fronts. He paused opposite a shining establishment conspicuously labeled "Gents' Furnishings," — a legend which a vivid display of "neckwear" blushing confirmed. Back toward him stood a short, burly figure, seemingly absorbed in contemplating the variegated wonders of the display window. Stephen March fixed a quizzical gaze on the back of the short man's neck, nodded to himself and remained staring at the figure before him for perhaps a minute.

Presently he said, drawlingly, "I'd take the purple one with the poker-chips on it, Scotty."

The rotund figure of the contemplative one remained motionless. Without turning his head, he replied with an exaggeration of the drawl: —

"No, you would n't, Steve. But I reckon you'd enjoy seein' me tied to it."

"Well, that's one on me," said March, laughing. "Did n't think the sheriff of Burnt Creek

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kept such a close watch on peaceful-looking strangers."

"Lookin'-glass," replied Robert Scott, the blue-eyed, rotund little sheriff, as he jerked his thumb toward the shop-window. "I see you comin' across the street."

The two men shook hands with a silence and brevity that suggested a long acquaintance-ship.

"Broke?" said Scott, as they moved away from the window.

"No," replied March, laughing. "But I'm so badly bent that it would take a chemist to tell the difference."

"Well, here's a drug-store, Steve." And the sheriff mopped his cropped and grizzled head with a blue bandanna.

"You can't run me in there, even if you are sheriff of this burg," said March, with a semblance of bluster that caused a passer-by to turn and look wonderingly at the two men.

"I'm goin' to," replied his companion, taking his arm and urging him along the street to an open hallway. They clumped up a flight of bare, worn stairs. The sheriff unlocked a door and they entered a white-walled room, stringently neat with its iron bed, stove, two chairs, a desk, and a small table.

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Robert Scott, ordinarily a genial, ruddy-faced, twinkling-eyed individual, nevertheless impressed one as a man who knew his own mind. It frequently developed that he knew the minds of those who thought otherwise. The oft-quoted, "You'll get Bob Scott," to a refractory youngster, and the not-infrequent and proud reply, "Huh! I ain't afraid of Bob Scott. He knows *me*," spoke eloquently for the little sheriff's official reputation and unofficial popularity.

"I'm goin' to run you," he began, motioning toward a chair, "into the stiffest game you've been up against yet, sonny."

"All right, fawther," drawled March.

"By Gad! I'm old enough to be, at that, you — you — Beef Trust."

"Oh, I don't know," said March, gazing pointedly at the other's solid belt line.

"Bu — bu — buttermilk!" stuttered the sheriff, his eyes snapping.

"Sure," said March. "But what's the job?"

Robert Scott's manner changed quickly from easy banter to a brisk and businesslike terseness.

"Know John Hope?" he asked.

"By sight. He don't know me."

"Sure?"

"Yes. Hand taller than you. Same build. Red face; blue eyes; solid; gray hair."

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"White," corrected Scott. "You been away five years. Know Brent Townsend?"

"Yes. He knows me, or used to before John Hope came over from New Hampshire and went into partnership with him."

"Well, you keep away from Brent after you've heard what I've got to say. Ever hear of Slink Peters, gum-picker, rum-seller — some queer in his head? Came from over your way."

"Yes. He used to come into Taylorville once in a while. I had trouble with him when I was deputy over there. That's some five years back."

"Well, he's dead."

"All right," replied March.

The sheriff hesitated. "I *say* he's dead. I'll take that back. Here's the lay-out. Last spring, year ago, May 22d, Peters left this town with a jug of rum. He was headed for the Hope-Townsend camps. May 23d, at 1 P.M. a log-roller named Britt — Louis Britt — came into Hope's camp with a story about John Hope havin' done for Peters. Told the cook, Smooch Larkin. Then Britt disappeared. Said he was comin' to Burnt Creek City, but he did n't. Same afternoon John Hope, *he* disappeared. Same afternoon woods caught afire on the point where Peters's shack was, and Peters disappeared. No trace of bones

or nothin'. None of 'em 's shown up since. Now, what 's the answer?"

March silently reviewed the sheriff's lean, athletic array of facts.

"Was John Hope seen after the row?" he asked presently.

"Forgot that. Yes, he was. One or two of the men say they saw him in the wangan office talkin' to Brent Townsend that afternoon."

"And Brent?" queried March.

"Froze up tight. He knows, but he won't talk."

"What's the matter with your deputies?"

Scott grinned. "I sent Borden up to Free River Settlement to see if I could get a trace of John Hope up that way. Borden he come back without learnin' anything. He's good enough round this here country where he knows everybody, but it'll take a real man, built square and hard, to get where I think Hope's gone. I'm thinkin' he 's up Whisper Lake way."

March whistled. "Whisper Lake country? That land's never been opened up — not even lumbered."

"Kind of thought your trainin' up in the Klondike would 'a' put you in shape to tackle anything we had on this coast, Steve. It's this way. I liked old John, howbe he did have a

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mighty quick temper. Now the papers know I liked him and they're usin' it against me because I ain't got John yet. They're tryin' to down me and you know what politics is."

March tilted back in his chair and eyed his companion. "I was just twenty-five cents this side of asking Brent Townsend for a job this morning. That's where I stand. You offer me this job and I'll take it. And there are two reasons why, Scotty: one is that I don't intend to go back to my folks in Taylorville broke, and the other is that I didn't ask for this job."

"All right, Steve. I knew you couldn't hang around town long; that you'd be pikein' off in the brush somewhere. Now I'll stake you to an outfit and you can charge your bill over to the Rawley House up to me."

March, displaying the twenty-five-cent piece, said with a laugh: "Come over to the hotel and I'll treat. Spend this all at once."

"After carryin' it all the way from the Klondike?" asked the sheriff, twinkling.

"Yep. But I didn't. A girl gave it to me this morning, at the station."

"Girl? What's the joke?"

"Yes," replied March abstractedly. "She had brown eyes, and a whole heap of gold-brown hair and a smile that —"

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"Easy, Steve," said the grinning sheriff. "But hold on! Did she get off the 8.20 going north?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothin'. Well, so-long, sonny. I'm not goin' out on the street with you, for it might set some of the wise ones of this town talkin'. See you later. Better come up here."

"All right, grandpaw," drawled March, as he opened the door and began to descend the stairs.

"You — you —" The sheriff's mock indignation evaporated in a splutter. "Only one girl got off that 8.20 this morning, and she's John Hope's girl, Arlis. Seen her drivin' up to Brent Townsend's house. Wonder what Steve was gettin' at about her givin' him a quarter?"

The little man walked to the window and stood gazing down on the street. "Huh! There she is now and dinged if that long-legged Steve ain't raisin' his hat to her. She's a mighty fine little girl. Regular mother to John since his wife died. U-m-m. Guess Steve knows her, but he sure must 'a' been jokin' about that quarter."

CHAPTER VI

FREE RIVER

FORTY miles north of the Hope-Townsend camps and some eighty miles north of Burnt Creek City, a few weathered cabins dotted irregularly round the "store" harbored a score of half-breeds and Indians, their wives and children. The place was called Free River Settlement. Tucked away in a weed-grown clearing edged by bluff walls of encircling forest, it lay overlooking the sombre, iron-brown waters of Free River spreading indolently from timbered shore to shore from the wider expanse of Pleasant Lake, a mile above.

In the still heat of the August noon a half-breed woman sat in the doorway of the cabin nearest the river. She was dextrously winding a ball of red yarn from a skein stretched on the back of a chair. Invisible until almost trodden upon, the male habitants lay grouped in the meadow grass, in the shadow of a tumble-down barn, back of the store. Trappers, fishermen, hunters, lumbermen, they enjoyed the seasonable leisure of Au-

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gust with its slumbering inactivities. September would be upon them soon enough. Then the canoe, the axe, the rifle, the trolling-line, and keen air to breathe as they worked. That would be their great "to-morrow." To-day their faces glistened with sweat, even while lying, loose-garmented in the shade, talking or listening.

"Little" Jules, drawing a dangling sleeve across his forehead, sat up and gazed at the group round him. "All you mans t'ink ees w'at Beeg Jean DuBois he say to you. He say, 'Arête donc!' an' you do laik de horrsé in de lum-baire camp. Den he say, 'Marche donc!' an' you do w'at he say jus'same. You h'all 'fraid of heem, Ah t'ink. Ah no make fool to do dat."

"You no 'fraid of heem?" asked a tall, black-shirted "breed," turning on his elbow to look at Jules.

"Ah no 'fraid of h'any mans een dees forêt!" replied Jules, with a comprehensive gesture.

One of the Indians grunted and motioned toward the river with his pipe. "Canoe," he said indifferently.

Two or three of the group sat up, gazed at the mud-encrusted landing below them and then lapsed into their former indolence.

The occupant of the canoe paddled leisurely toward the landing, surveyed the dozen-odd

FREE RIVER

overturned canoes on the bank, estimated the *ensemble* of the settlement at a glance, and sat with his broad shoulders relaxed, as the bow grounded in the mud. He arose and stepped lightly over the thwarts, and stooping, beached the canoe, turning it bottom-side-up over the two small packs and the spare paddle that had lain in the bow. He swung up the path carrying his muscular height easily, despite the smothering heat that wavered over the baked mud and shriveled clumps of grass.

"There's a native that looks good-natured," he reflected, noticing the woman in the doorway of the cabin. "Morning! Where's the boss?"

"Me," said the half-breed woman, touching her generous girth with her seamed forefinger.

March smiled. "Well, where's your man?"

"Ba'tiste, he veet Petite Jules an' h'all de mans —" and she pointed toward the store.

He nodded and strode toward the uplifted heads that sank slowly back to their arm-props as he approached. One by one the men sat up as he saluted them with a brief "Howdy."

"Bo' jou! Bo' jou!" boomed the guttural bass of the Indians. And "Bo' jou! Bo' jou!" volleyed, an octave higher, from the Frenchmen.

"I'm March," he began. "Steve March. I'm

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up here timber-cruising this 'town' and Pleasant Lake. Want to get into Whisper Lake country." He drew a pipe from his pocket and fumbled for tobacco, meanwhile covertly watching the circle of brown faces that studied him from hat to moccasins with lazy, expressionless eyes. The gray flannel shirt rolled back from his throat, the dark trousers, and the usual footgear told them nothing. But the upward tilt of his dustless moccasins showed that he had been kneeling in a canoe for some little time. The quickness of his hands as he filled and lighted his pipe and the unconscious, slow ease with which he sank to his heels and squatted before them, bespoke swiftness and strength.

"Who for you mak' to look at de timbaire?" queried a breed.

"Hope-Townsend," replied March quickly, anticipating that some of the men worked for that company in the winter.

Several nodded.

Then Little Jules, short, squat, grizzled, asked, "You look for mans to guider een dees forêt?"

"Yes," replied March. "I want to hire a good man."

"'Ow long for you hire heem?" asked Jules.

"Three or four weeks."

Then he told them briefly that he had instruc-

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tions to cruise the timberlands of Pleasant Lake, the upper reaches of Free River and on up into the Whisper Lake country. He would pay three dollars a day to the right man.

The Indians grunted. One of the breeds swore softly. No one spoke. March arose and looked down on them, smiling.

Little Jules drew up his knee and re-tied a moccasin-thong. "Dat vair' bad rivaire, dat Whispaire Rivaire—dose Seven Gates discharrge. No mans mak' traverse to dat place."

"Well, I 've got to," said March.

"T'ree dollar not mooch for dat," said Jules.

"All right," said March; "I'll make it four and grub. I understand it's rough country. I'll do my share of the work. All I want is a man who knows the 'rips' in that river."

The breeds shook their heads, grinning vacuously. The inert Indians gazed at the hills. Little Jules laughed outright.

"What's so funny?" asked March.

"Eef one of dees mans go een veet you, 'ow he goin' get h'out?" asked Jules.

"Same way he got in."

"Non." Little Jules shook his head. "No mans vat leeve mak' to pole de canoe up dat discharrge. She run down t'rough de high place laik dees." In quick pantomime the Frenchman indicated a high,

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straight-walled gorge through which tumbled heavy waters.

"No trail overland?"

"She wan beeg muskeg h'all roun' dat Lake," said Jules conclusively.

"Guess that settles it," said March, turning toward the store.

But one of the Indians, watching his eyes, concluded differently. He, of all the men, knew who March was, although the big white man had apparently forgotten him. Again they squatted and began talking as March crossed the sunburnt patch of meadow behind the store. One of the Indians waved them to silence. "Poleese," he growled, jerking his head toward the river.

"How dat you say?" exclaimed a breed.

"Poleese. He mak' um ketch moi for keel dat h'ole François Flambeau, longtaine go by. Ah no keel um. Den Ah com' bek."

"He no spik to you," said the breed.

"He know — he no spik um," replied the Indian.

From the woods came the faint *whit! whit!* of a partridge calling to her brood. In the clearing the intense light of noon emphasized the raw ugliness of the clay-banked cabins, their bleached logs seamed and gaping where wads of moss caulking had dropped from the chinks. The

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brown river, blinding in the sun, glistened like oil. A diminutive beagle hound bayed dismally as March passed the last cabin on his way to the river, and four half-starved puppies howled a plaintive accompaniment. "Beagles up here?" said March, stooping to pat one of the puppies that scampered out, yipping valiantly. The little dog, small even for the smallest type of beagle, rolled on his back and squirmed playfully in the dust.

"Your head's all right," said March, lifting the puppy by the slack, easy fold of his neck-skin; "but that's all there is to you except a few ribs and a tail. Your legs are n't long enough to count, yet." He put the squirming puppy down and patted the mother beagle, who lay, nose extended on the ground, watching him.

The group back of the store glanced up as he returned, carrying a tin cup and a bottle. "Friend of mine gave me this before I came in, but I don't use it," he explained as the cup and bottle went round quickly. "Now if any of you men change your minds, I'll be at the store for a while."

Little Jules, who had managed to secure the bottle a second time by changing from one side of the semicircle to the other as it went round, filled the cup and tossed the empty bottle in the

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bushes. The cup glinted in the sun, and, blinking, he smacked his lips.

"Ah don' mak' traverse to dat Whispaire Lake," he said finally. "But Ah know one mans dat mak' traverse to dat lake."

The men glanced at each other, then at Jules.

The Indian who had said he knew March, arose. "He mak' fool um. He lie. He don' know um."

"You say Ah mak' lie?" snarled Jules, whirling on the Indian. "You say Ah don' know w'ere Beeg Jean DuBois he leeve?"

Coolly the Indian placed his hand on Jules's chest and thrust him back. "Papoose!" he grunted. Then he swept his arm round the circle. "Ask um." And he gestured toward the bronzed faces.

"Jules he dronk," said one.

"Oui. He mak' dat lie," cried another.

"Sacré! You h'all dam' lie!" cried Jules. "Jean DuBois he know w'ere dat lake she ees. Ah show you, by Gar! Ah keel you . . ."

"Well," said March, as the Frenchman hesitated. "You made a good start, anyway."

Little Jules backed out of the circle. "Better come over to the store with me," said March.

"Den Ah go!" exclaimed Jules, turning to accompany him.

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"You go?" said the Indian who had interfered.
"You go?"

"Ah go!" said Jules.

The men stood watching them as they passed round the corner of the store. Then an Indian hurried from the group and slipped away toward the river.

March, nodding pleasantly to the storekeeper, introduced himself, and, after a brief chat about Burnt Creek City affairs, turned to Jules, who seemed ill at ease.

The little Frenchman glanced at the storekeeper. "'Ow mooch you geeve moi?" he asked.

"That depends on you," replied March. "Four dollars a day and found, if you go in. I'll leave security here at the store. Then in case of accident your wife can get the money."

Little Jules shook his head. "Ah tink Ah don' go. But Beeg Jean, he go to dat lak' mabbe some-taime." Jules's anger was evaporating and with it his momentary courage.

The storekeeper, shuffling his fat bulk past them, went to the doorway. "Hey, Jules," he said presently. "Who is that going up-river? Joe Toomey?"

Jules hastened to the door. "Oui. Dat Joe Toomey's canoe. He go for tell Jean DuBois w'at Ah say."

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"You looking for Jean DuBois?" asked the storekeeper.

"Yes. I understand he's the man that knows about Whisper Lake country."

The storekeeper surveyed March from head to foot with a new interest. "Whisper Lake!" he exclaimed.

"Timber-cruising," replied March.

"Uhuh. Timber-cruisin' — timber-cruisin'," muttered the fat man. "Whisper Lake — Whisper —"

"Well?" said March, irritated by the other's mumbling.

"Oh, nothin'," said the other, waddling to the counter and from behind it sorting a thin packet of letters. "Expectin' any mail?"

"No. But where does this Jean DuBois hang out?"

Little Jules, about to reply, caught a quick movement of the storekeeper's head. "Ah tink Ah don' know," he replied weakly.

Stephen March contained his disgust with difficulty. He realized, however, that he would gain nothing by making much of the matter. Already he understood that the natives suspected his real purpose in attempting to enter Whisper Lake country, and this knowledge, despite his immediate disappointment, pleased him rather

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than otherwise. His quest assumed a broader aspect. It meant more than simply discovering the old lumberman. It was rapidly developing into a game in which March, single-handed, hazarded his natural keenness and strength against the known difficulties of travel in an unexplored region and against a subtle but stimulating undercurrent of adventure and native sentiment.

"All right, Jones, old man," he said, shaking hands with the Frenchman. "Thanks just the same."

Then he bought a few provisions, asked casually about the character of the surrounding timberlands, and finally left the store. On his way to his canoe, as he passed the cabin nearest the river, the beagle, followed by her slinking puppies, again came from beneath the cabin and saluted him.

He stopped and called to the half-breed woman in the doorway, "Want to sell one of the pups?"

The woman braced her hands on the door-sill and arose with a grunt. "Dose vair' good chiens," she volunteered, calling the dogs to her. "Buy h'all dose?"

"Not this time," said March, smiling. "I'll give you two dollars for the little one."

"O-o-o-ah—he ma petite. Non! Non! He de bes' wan. You geeve fife dollar?"

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"Two," said March, turning to go. "Don't know that I want him anyway."

A moment later, as he loaded the canoe and was about to step in, he heard a voice and the patter of bare feet behind him.

"You go 'way fraum dees place?" asked the woman.

"Yes, and, without wanting to hurt your feelings any, just as quick as I can."

"Ah tink dat you goin' stay een dees place."

"Well, I'll have to disappoint you," he said, smiling.

"You goin' 'way Ah mak' to sell dat chien. Two dollar. Qveek! 'fore ma Ba'tiste he come."

She unrolled her apron and handed the tiny beagle to March, who thanked her and gave her the two dollars.

He dropped the puppy into the canoe, dug his paddle into the mud, and shoved out into the river. As he caught the slow current and swung against it, he noticed that the little dog was chewing vigorously at something that clicked in his jaws. He stooped and ran his forefinger round the puppy's mouth. Out dropped a dress-button.

"The last one she had, I'll bet," said March, tossing the button overboard. The puppy whined, and, scrambling from his hands in a futile endeavor to recover the button, plumped overboard.

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March grabbed the floundering dog and dropped him into the canoe again. "Sure sign," he said, grinning. "You're christened all right — and we'll call you 'Button.'"

CHAPTER VII

BUTTON ASSISTS

A STATELY buck and a slender doe picked their steps down the sandy floor of the beach, sniffed the cool of the morning and waded leisurely out into the shallows of the lake. Moving indolently they nibbled at the water-grasses. A promise of sun edged the eastern hills, spreading thin gold on their black-crested ridges. A dart of light shot through the heavy mist that lay on the water. The deer lifted their muzzles, gazed at the spear of sunlight, and moved on.

Stephen March, crouching in a clump of firs, centred his rifle on the buck's shoulder. Suddenly the animal stiffened, snorted, and splashed awkwardly to shore. The doe looked up, hesitated, and turned to follow. As she quickened her pace, March lowered his rifle. "Wonder what scared 'em?" he muttered. The answer came quickly upon his question. The silence of the early September morning was ripped to a thousand barking echoes. The doe leaped, fell on her side, and strug-

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gled piteously. As her head rose and sank, two slow, red streaks oozed from her nostrils and, spreading over the bubbles, thinned and disappeared in the subsiding turmoil of the waters. A crash, and the white flag of the buck flickered on the hillside and was gone. Across the lake a loon shrilly taunted the retreating echoes.

From a point of land below, a canoe pushed through the mist toward the fallen deer. Beaching the boat, the occupant waded to the deer, swung it to his shoulder and plodded to shore.

"Got you dat taime, by Gar!" chuckled Jean DuBois, as he whipped his knife along the paunch of the doe. "Ah tink Ah get dat buck. He leet' mooch qveek — an' dis mis' vair' bad, but Beeg Jean he mak' de good shoot, hein?"

All the while he worked swiftly and deftly. March, squatting in the brush, watched the Frenchman cut up the meat and pack it in the canoe. His first impulse was to step out and speak to DuBois, but he felt that his own accidental position savored too strongly of game-warden tactics to make his discovery altogether agreeable to the Frenchman, so he eased down the hammer of his Winchester and waited. Since arriving at Free River Settlement, March had made his temporary headquarters some three miles above the village on Pleasant Lake. He

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had spent the greater part of August in exploring the many coves of the lake, searching industriously for signs of the big Frenchman, or his camp. Returning to the settlement for provisions he had surprised the half-breed wife of "Ba'tiste" into a fair description of DuBois by casually mentioning that he and the Frenchman were old acquaintances. The figure that now arose from bending over the carcass of the deer and stepped to the canoe answered her description admirably.

As DuBois paddled across the lake, March, hurrying along shore, reached his camp and jerked a pair of field-glasses from his pack. The distant canoe crept steadily toward the farther shore and just when he expected to see the Frenchman land, the canoe disappeared in the dark, feathery edge of the dim shore-line.

"And I've been poking around this lake for three weeks looking for that stream. That's Big Jean all right. He must be camped up there in the hills toward Whisper Lake. Well, I'll give him a good start and then drift over and locate him."

At noon that day March stood on the height-of-land overlooking the lake. He had poled up the narrow stream discovered to him by the Frenchman, until the water shallowed to impos-

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sible canoe travel. Taking his pack-sack and the little beagle, he had then looked for a trail. The beagle found it.

Here on the topmost ridge where scarred and riven granite reared in chaotic, moss-encrusted grimness through the heavy timber, the trail turned on itself and ended. Twice he followed the loop, carefully looking for a way over the ridge. Then he swung out of his pack and rested.

Button, whose chief interest in life was the discovering and untangling of new trails (either game or human, it made no difference so long as they led somewhere into the alluring beyond), crept away unobserved and continued the hunt independently. March, presently missing the dog, jumped up and hurried after him, calling softly. But the beagle kept worming through the brush, just beyond reach. The faint scent grew warm, hot, positive! Proud of his nose-craft Button lifted his head and bayed.

"Hey, little bow-legs, stop it!" And March lurched down and grabbed the astonished puppy. "Now you *have* done it. Here I've spent all of three weeks trying to feed and train you into a real dog and there you go advertising us in high C."

Button cringed and whined. He did n't understand this unnecessary interruption to his fun.

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"You're a baby, you are," said March teasingly. "Sorry, are n't you?"

The puppy crept up and nuzzled the man's hand. "All right," said March, who, in his natural instinct for animals, appreciated the puppy's sensitiveness enough not to abuse it. "You're out on bail, though, and don't you do it again."

Surmising that the big Frenchman's camp was not far, he leashed the dog and followed him. The noonday sun broke irregularly through the surrounding spruce, and struck keen, white patches of light on the twig-littered ground. A shadowy weft of branches wavered on the bold rise of granite as they dropped down the eastern slope. Button, his nose mysteriously busy, wound in and out of the underbrush until the abrupt slope eased to a comparative level. Presently, when they were abreast of a "blow-down" or tangle of fallen trees, the little dog deliberately sat down, and his tongue lolled out like a wet, red-flannel insole. March squatted patiently beside him, realizing his entire dependence on the beagle, for there was not the slightest indication of a track or trail. Finally the dog, after darting back and forth beneath the logs, stood on his hind legs, sniffing. March grinned and lifted him to the nearest fallen tree. Once more the little dog busied himself, nose down, following the tree to

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another which lay across it. Down the second tree-trunk he tugged impatiently to where its base lay in a clump of alders.

Glancing about, March shifted his pack to the ground and tucked the dog in. "Now you stay there and don't move till I come back," he said, shaking his forefinger at Button. Button understood, for March, while encamped on Pleasant Lake, had deliberately and with much patience taught him to behave in the canoe and also to lie curled in the pack-sack either in the quiet of camp or on the trail, where March often had to "tote" the beagle, owing to the ruggedness of the country.

The little dog pretended to go to sleep, but no sooner had his master left him than his head poked from under the flap. He peered wistfully at the man's back as it disappeared in the alders. He cocked his ears as he heard the soft lisp of moccasins crossing bog-land. Then nothing disturbed him for a long time save a solitary pair of rose-breasted grosbeaks twittering in the cedars.

In the black wood-loam beyond the alders lay a spring, and from it ran a worn, narrow path leading to a tiny cabin half hidden in the shadows of the clustering pines. Through the open

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doorway the afternoon sunlight slanted and spread like water on the dark puncheon floor. March, pushing through the bushes, whistled. A shadow blotted the sunlight in the doorway and the big Frenchman, Jean DuBois, stepped out into the open, and seeing March, saluted him with a deep, hearty, "Bo' jou! — Bo' jou!"

March, striding forward, extended his hand, glancing appreciatively at the other's great arch of chest, rugged, corded throat, and dark, strong features. "Hello!" he said heartily, tensing his muscles to meet the grip of the Frenchman's broad palm.

"You com' een?" said DuBois, stepping aside with a gesture of invitation.

For a second they stood, each covertly admiring the other's physical excellence. The Frenchman was the taller and heavier — a magnificent animal, possessed of a careless strength and largeness of limb that contrasted with March's alert and clean-cut figure. Then March entered the cabin, accepting a seat on the bench which DuBois proffered.

"We smoke?" said the Frenchman, offering a beaded tobacco pouch.

March filled his pipe, meanwhile glancing about. Despite the woodman's usual equipment of tools and utensils the place had an atmosphere

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of uninhabitedness as though it were a temporary rather than a permanent abode.

"I'm timber-cruising," said March presently, as the Frenchman lounged to a seat near the opposite wall. "Little Jules of Free River Settlement told me you went in to Whisper Lake once in a while. Thought I might get you to guide for me. I understand Whisper River is the real thing."

DuBois, spinning the tobacco-pouch by its thong, nodded.

"All the Free River folks seem afraid to tackle it."

The Frenchman smiled. "Dey don' know dat rivaire laike Ah know heem. Mabbe dat ees for why dey don' go."

"Perhaps that's it," said March non-committally.

"You say to Joe Toomey he go?"

"Yes. He had his chance."

"Why for you mak' to go to dat Whispaire Lac?"

"Timber," replied March.

DuBois shook his head. "Dey no way for get de log h'out of dat place. No rivaire run h'out dat lac an' she wan muskeg h'all roun' dat lac."

"Well, my employers will have to risk getting the lumber out. I've got my instructions."

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"'Ow mooch you geeve moi for guider to dat lac?"

"Three dollars a day and found," replied March, purposely mentioning the lowest amount he had offered the Free River men.

"You say to Petite Jules four dollar —" DuBois caught himself, but it was too late.

"I see you're posted all right," said March, laughing. "Well, I'll make it four. You're worth it."

"Ah don' mak' traverse to dat lac. De snow she com' vair' qveek an' den Ah don' go."

"Don't want to contradict you, DuBois," said March, drawing a crumpled letter from his pocket. "Here's a letter that your postmaster at Free River gave me by mistake. I had some mail coming from Burnt Creek City and this got mixed with it." He arose and handed the letter to the Frenchman. "It's addressed to John Hope," he added quietly.

The big Frenchman glanced at it and tucked it in his shirt. March watched the big vein swell in the other's swarthy neck. Stepping back he again sat down on the bench, sliding his right hand beneath his left armpit as he folded his arms.

"Ah say to you, eef you go een, you don' com' h'out. You tink Ah don' know?" said DuBois, his black eyes narrowing.

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"I know there's some reason for you fellows wanting to keep me out of that country," replied March, watching the other closely.

"Ah don' do wan leet' t'ing for keep you fraum go een to dat lac," said DuBois. "Dat Whispaire Rivaire she do h'all dat."

"That's all right, DuBois. But I want to ask you a question. Why did you accept that letter addressed to John Hope in such a hurry?"

"You know h'all ting, Ah tink," said the Frenchman.

"Only this," and March nodded to a pack that stood in one corner; "you did n't have that pack when you came in here this morning. Packed it since. All you had in your canoe was a couple of hind-quarters of deer. You've put a new shoe on that big setting-pole out by the door—and it's going toward winter. I'm guessing, but I'm guessing close—"

"Hah!" And the Frenchman leaped to his feet.

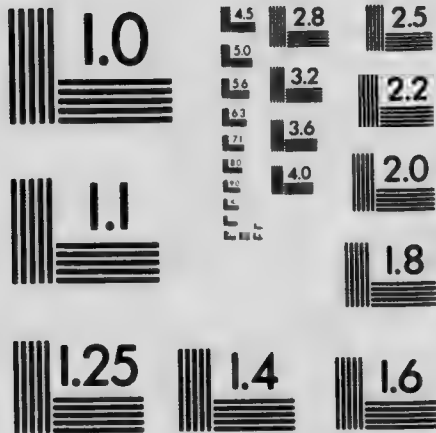
"Easy!" March shrugged his left shoulder and a Colt automatic gleamed in his hand.

DuBois faltered and his hands relaxed. Then he grinned fearlessly. "Ah don' keel wan mans w'at haf de gran courage—" he began.

"No?" And March smiled. "You're wrong about the courage, though. The *courage* is in



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this little automatic perforator. If I didn't have that handy, I'd be some scared."

"You mak' fight veet moi—an' put dat leet' gun on de table?"

"Your invitation to try it out almost makes me want to," replied March. "I think you'd put up a lovely scrap; but if I'm going into that country," and he waved his hand toward the east, "I don't want to run the chance of being crippled up on the start." Satisfied that DuBois was shielding John Hope and that the latter was camped on Whisper Lake, March accepted philosophically the minor disappointment of Jean's refusal to guide. "Well, so-long," he said, slipping the automatic into his shoulder-holster. "I'll see you again sometime."

The big Frenchman cursed softly. Then he laughed. "You haf' wan gran' heart to mak' fight, Ah tink. But dat Whispaire Rivaire she don' know dat—an' you go, Ah say you don' com' back."

March stepped through the doorway and out into the open. DuBois leaned in the doorway watching him as he swung up the path toward the spring. Near him, almost within reach, stood his rifle. He glanced at it, then at the other's broad back, and shook his head. "Hei!" he called and March swung round. "Eef you don' get keel 'fore

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you com' to dat las' gate in dat rivaire, den you tak' de lef' side. De lef'," he added.

"Thanks!" halloed March. Then to himself. "Probably he is telling me the left side, hoping I'll think he's lying and take the right. Well, we'll see."

DuBois hurriedly cleared away the remains of his noon meal. Then he swung into his packstraps, and with rifle and setting-pole, strode out, kicked the door shut, and struck off through the woods.

"Ah mak' qveek traverse," he muttered. "Den Ah tell Mo'sieur 'Ope w'at dat beeg Marreh he say to moi."

CHAPTER VIII

THE FISHERMAN

NEXT morning March, on his way to Free River Settlement for a final stock of supplies, came suddenly upon a camp as he rounded the low sandy point which marked the entrance to a trout-stream entering Pleasant Lake. The overturned canoe, dazzling in its newness, was of a make unfamiliar to him. The silk waterproof tent, bearing the trademark of a loudly advertised "sporting goods" firm, hung disconsolately between two trees. The new paddles, unprotected from the sun, were already beginning to warp, and altogether the camp spoke eloquently of the city man minus a guide. March landed and called. The tent was unoccupied. Stepping into his canoe he poled leisurely up the stream, curious as to the new arrival on the uninhabited shores of Pleasant Lake. Half an hour of poling and he came upon a slender figure standing waist-deep in a pool. The khaki-clad figure stood back toward him tugging at a line above his head, on which was a cast of

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glittering trout-flies, entangled in a nodding branch.

"Hello!" called March, checking the canoe; "getting any fish?"

The young man in khaki turned his head slowly, and with great composure, under the circumstances, answered affably, "None up there."

March backed his canoe to shore and, drawing a Colt automatic from beneath the thwarts, raised his arm. The little gun barked and with the surrounding echo down fluttered a leafy twig, and the trout-flies.

"Oh, Maria!" exclaimed the fisherman. "Are you Bill Cody, or merely an understudy?"

"I'm Stephen March when I'm in town," replied the other, laying the pistol in the canoe.

"Good!" said the fisherman. "Thanks. And it fits. I'm Dick Baird, late of Free River — and beyond."

"I don't object," said March.

"Sorry — but I squandered my private stock on the unresponsive community at Free River Settlement."

March nodded. "Will they take a fly in September?" he asked, indicating the pool.

"Don't expect 'em to. I'd be as surprised as they would if they did. I'm just killing time."

After making a few ineffectual casts, Baird

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reeled in his line. "Camping on the lake?" he asked.

"Yes. Cruising this piece of timber. Got a guide?"

"No. Tried to hire one at Free River, but those chaps — why, I offered two of 'em four large, noisy dollars a day and the perquisites; meal ticket and all that. They acted about as animated as a peck of dried apples. Moistened 'em, too, but they would n't budge."

"You did n't try the right stuff," said March, grinning.

"At your mercy. The information is worth the risk."

"Dynamite," said March.

"I suspect you're an anarchist — but, seriously, do you know where I can get a couple of good men?"

"Two?"

"Oh, not for myself exactly. I expect a friend up here next week. I'm to go into Whisper Lake with my friend, and we'll need two guides at least."

"N-no, I don't," replied March slowly; "unless you can get Jean DuBois. I believe he's —"

"That's what they told me at Free River," interrupted Baird. "I was to meet my friend there, but I came up here hoping to stumble on this

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DuBois. No one at the settlement seemed willing to say where he lived. Funny bunch down there."

March, stooping to pick up his pole, smiled. Here was some one else anxious to go into Whisper Lake and no guides to be had. Undoubtedly the natives were either afraid of the rapids or pretended to be. "DuBois holds the whip hand," thought March. "But what the city man wants up here puzzles me." He concluded to learn more of the fisherman. "Step in if you're going downstream," he said.

"Thought you were going up?"

"No. Saw your tent on the point. Felt lonesome and poked up here to say 'hello.'"

"Game-warden?" queried Baird, stepping into the boat.

"No. Timber. Just sit back of that thwart and we'll drop down to the lake."

"Welcome to our city," said Baird as they landed on the low point at the stream's mouth. "I pitched that tent. I'm no south-paw twirler either, but you can see the curve, all right. And cooking! If you could see me doing the Boston with a hot-handled fry-pan in one hand and an armful of smoke languishing in the other — you'd wish that you had known me sooner."

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

March picked up the bright, new hardware-store axe that lay edge up beside a conglomeration of hacked and half-split driftwood.

"Please don't spoil that axe," said Baird whimsically, as he drew off his cumbersome wading-boots and rummaged for moccasins.

"Could n't," said March, running his thumb over its nicked and blunted edge. "But it will do."

Richard Baird watched him as he shifted the tent-stakes, cut and rigged a frame and hangers for the fireplace, and finally, without noticeable effort, chopped through a fallen cedar and split the short end into clean white lengths of "wet-weather" kindling.

"See here!" said Baird with a tinge of expostulation in his voice, "I did n't invite you here to work. I'm lonesome as the deuce, but if you tidy up everything I'll be out of a job — and I need practice."

"Work?" said March, as with a turn of his wrist he drove the axe into the end of a log and sat down.

Baird whistled. "Could n't drive that axe that far into mud," he said.

"I'd try," said March, laughing; "and then leave it there. You can buy a good one at Free River Settlement. Say, why don't you come over

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to my camp while you're here. I can't cook, but I know the motions."

"That's bully!" Baird hesitated a moment. "If you'll allow me to —"

"No," interrupted his companion; "I'm working for wages already. But you can fetch along your grub. How long are you going to stay in?"

Again Baird hesitated, studying his companion's face. "Ever hear of Whisper Lake?" he finally asked.

March nodded.

"Ever been up there?"

"No."

"Well, the friend I'm waiting for is going to Whisper Lake; that is, if we can get guides. I'm a kind of advance agent to hustle up guides and so forth."

"Pretty late in the season to tackle that trip, is n't it?"

"I suppose so. But my friend is determined to go. That's why I'm here. I'm no woodsman," he added modestly; "but I'm going to do all I can."

"It's a hard trip," said March, rising. "I believe there's some pretty heavy water in that gorge — over the divide —"

"Were you going in?" Baird asked quickly.

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

"Thought of it. Couldn't get a guide, so I'm pretty much in the same fix that you're in."

"Well," said Baird slowly, "I'll accept your invitation to camp with you. Perhaps we can arrange to explore the country a little before the others come."

CHAPTER IX

"INSTRUCTIONS"

AN early September rain, beginning on the afternoon that Baird moved over to Stephen March's camp, lasted three days. The two men, cheerfully accepting the limitations imposed by the weather, loafed in the tents, talked, smoked, and became acquainted. They discussed woodcraft in all its interesting details, Baird questioning eagerly and March replying with the unconcern of one who had lived too long in and too close to the wilderness to find enthusiasm for its manifold vagaries. He knew it as a great outdoor workshop. He knew his tools and how to use them, but saw nothing romantic in their use. Baird's polite little formality of "Mr." March quickly gave place to the informality of "Stephen," as naturally as the smoke curled up from his pipe. Somewhat nervous and erratic himself, he enjoyed the contrasting stability of March's equable disposition and eventually came to appreciate the easy silences beside the night camp-fire. In the course of a week they became decidedly friendly, Baird inclining to become

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

confidential, but his companion maintained a genial middle course that reached no deeper into personalities than the anecdote or reminiscence seemed to warrant for its own sake.

One morning, as the rising sun burned keenly on the black, rain-washed rocks and tree-trunks and danced in a thousand reflections on the glistening foliage, Baird, standing before the fire, cleared his throat and began histrionically: "The wilderness (I say, Steve, this is fo. you) breeds no lack of true respect among its denizens, in eliminating the formalities. Nor do its denizens show any lack of respect for the wilderness in naming an acre or so of fallen timber, in all its appalling impassiveness, a 'blow-down.' Stretches of quick, angry water appear none the less suggestively energetic in being termed 'rips.' Directness is the keynote of its eternal symphony from the exultant majors of December storms to the plaintive minor cadences of spring. How's that, Steve?"

"You won't take on flesh packing that kind of language over these hills. Guess you mean these little old woods keep growing right along and minding their own business, winter and summer. Is that what you're getting at?"

Baird laughed good-naturedly. "Yes, that's it."

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Stephen March, gently oscillating a fry-pan over the fire, glanced up at his companion. "Why did n't you say so at first?"

"There you are, proving my theory yourself. But come, now, Steve, did n't you ever have that inexplicable, far-away, overwhelming sensation of being at one with this eternal quietude, this elemental grandeur —"

"Sure!" interrupted March as he hooked the bubbling coffee-pot from over the fire. "And I'm anything but a nerve specialist, but I can tell you what causes it. It's looking at too much scenery on an empty stomach, Dick, and here's the cure."

As they munched their bacon and camp-bread, March paused, trying to recall a word in his friend's eulogy on the forest. "Den — denizens, that's it. I think that word sounds out of place for the woods; don't you?"

"What would you suggest?" asked Baird.

"Me? Oh, I'd say — 'folks,' maybe."

"Ever read 'The Silent Places'?"

"Yes," replied March. "That's a book a man don't forget."

"I wonder if you've ever read 'Sundown Trails'?" said Baird tentatively.

"Let me see. Think I did. Western stories with plenty of gun-play and —"

"That's it. What did you think of it?"

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"Made me think of a phonograph. Kind of a second-hand imitation of the real thing. Nothing wrong with 'em that I remember, except they seemed kind of made up."

Baird laughed boisterously, as much to overcome a feeling of chagrin as at the criticism he evoked. Struggling to balance a teetering cup of hot coffee on his knee, he slipped backward from the log on which he sat, his feet shot up and he sat down again at a lower elevation. "I suppose you think I'm an idiot," he said, referring to his tumble, "but I wrote 'Sundown Trails.' Had an impression that they were —"

"Well, you've got the impression all right," said March, as Baird got to his feet.

"O smother!" Baird looked disconsolately at the pannikin of bacon-grease beside the log and inspected his khaki trousers. "It's the only pair I have with me," he said helplessly.

"Well, I would n't part with 'em on that account," said March with ambiguous gravity.

Shortly afterward, as Baird sat astride a log, scrubbing doggedly at the soiled trousers, he called to March, who squatted on a rock down shore washing a flannel shirt: "I say, Steve, got any more of that real, old Puritan yellow soap? This pink pride-of-the-nursery of mine is all smell and no suds."

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"There's another piece in my pack in the tent," called March. "Help yourself."

"Unassailable as the 'Seats of the Mighty,'" said Baird ruefully, eyeing the discolored hemisphere of khaki. "Wouldn't care a hang if Arlis wasn't coming."

He entered March's tent and rummaged in the pack-sack. He drew a hard, oblong object from the bag. "Funny place to keep soap," he muttered, opening the little box. Compact within it was a razor, a stick of shaving-soap, a brush and a paper, neatly folded. "Directions," he said to himself. "Just as if Steve needed directions to know how to shave." He glanced at the paper idly. Then his lips drew to a straight line and he frowned. "Warrant — ! Warrant for the arrest — arrest of — John Hope ?"

Slowly he folded the paper, was about to replace it, and hesitated. Glancing through the opening of the tent, he tucked the paper into the pocket of his shirt.

"Find it?" called March from the shore.

"Yes," replied Baird, rummaging hurriedly through the pack again. He found the soap and came out of the tent. "Much obliged, Steve. Now I can really do something."

"So that's what *he* is," soliloquized Baird, glancing at his companion's back. "Well, he doesn't

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look nor act like one of that kind. Hang it! I like him better than any chap I've met in the woods and now he turns out to be — just a common — Great Scott! I hadn't any right to take that warrant. What good will it do — my taking it? Wonder if I can put it back?"

Later, as he stood before the fire drying the trousers, he asked March how far it was to Whisper Lake.

"Don't know exactly," replied March. "Maybe three or four days."

"You spoke of going up that way some day. Do you think you'll go very soon?"

March, who had purposely delayed attempting the journey until he found out how successful Baird's friend might be in obtaining guides, said he thought he would "make a try" at it in a day or two. Something in his companion's manner puzzled him. He knew Baird was friendly and wondered why the younger man did not invite him to accompany the party.

"I think I'll pull up stakes and go up to Free River Settlement to-morrow," said Baird.

March nodded.

CHAPTER X

HEAVY WEATHER

HERE'S that piece of soap, Steve," said Baird, as he stood at the entrance of March's tent next morning. "Much obliged."

"Keep it. I can get another chunk at Free River."

"So can I," said Baird, "if this wind ever goes down. Been blowing all night, and still at it." He glanced up at the racing clouds that drove in a gray level from the eastern ridges to the lowering western peaks of the far shore. "Not much chance of getting to Free River to-day, though."

March, sitting up in his blankets, gazed at the tumbling lake. "Oh, it's not wicked—yet. But it's snug enough right here. What are you up so early for?"

"Wind kept me awake," replied Baird, moving toward his own tent.

March glanced at the bar of soap and then lay back and drew the blankets over his shoulder. "Dick's mighty particular about returning that soap. Wonder what has got into him?"

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Presently he sat up again, drew his pack toward him, and dumped the contents on his blanket. The little hardwood box rolled from his knees and, bouncing from the edge of the browse bed, its cover sprung open. The razor, brush, and stick of shaving-soap lay in the sand. March, recovering the box, replaced the things, was about to close it and hesitated. "Guess I'll pin that warrant inside my shirt," he muttered. "If I did happen to go over in the canoe, I'd have that paper to work with, anyway. Where—?" He fumbled hastily through the box. "Dead sure I put it there." Again he examined the pack-sack, turning it inside out. "Gone, sure as I'm alive!"

Methodically he repacked his effects, strapped the pack, and got up. "If Dick found that paper it's two to nothing he burnt it. But what in the deuce would he want it for?" Then he remembered Baird's unnatural manner after borrowing the soap. "Well, I *am* easy. Dick's got something to do with the John Hope end of this string. I'll keep my eye on him."

Notwithstanding his anxiety at the disappearance of the warrant, Stephen March was unusually cheerful at breakfast and amused Baird with a series of rattling anecdotes gleaned from a long experience in the wilderness. "I used to guide once," said March, illustrating a humorous

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episode in which a city man figured prominently. "I was plumb sure I knew where we were," he continued. "The city man was hungry, scared, and just a little mad at me. Thought we were lost. But I knew that stream just as well as I know that those tents over there weren't there last night," and March turned and pointed across the lake.

"Where?" exclaimed Baird. "What? Those two little white dots? Tents? Are you certain?"

"That's about what the city man said," replied March, smiling. "But *he* was scared. Yes, I think your friend is over there."

Baird, who squatted by the fire, stood up. "Lend me your field-glass, Steve." He hoped that March would tell him to go into the tent and get the glass, but the other arose and returned, handing Baird the binoculars.

"You're correct," said Baird, returning the glasses; "but how do you know who it is?"

"Just guessing," replied March, watching the other's anxious face.

"But I was to meet them at Free River — and arrange for guides and all that."

"Well, looks as though they had got ahead of you, Dick." And March settled comfortably in the lee of a boulder and lighted his pipe. It was Baird's turn to clean up the breakfast-things, and

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March watched him as he carefully separated his own utensils and equipment and packed them piece by piece. He smiled as Baird glanced frequently toward the distant tents and as frequently toward his canoe. "Dick's getting his nerve up for a break-away and does n't know how to say so."

Finally Baird, after a lingering look at the tossing lake, gestured toward the west. "I'm going over."

"You will, if you tackle her alone," said March.

The other's face became almost desperate. "But I've got to go."

"What's your hurry? Your friends will wait. Nothing doing in this wind."

"Could you get across?" asked Baird.

"Might. I would n't tackle it for fun, though."

Baird, his hands in his pockets, paced back and forth nervously. Yesterday he would have asked March frankly to risk crossing with him. To-day . . .

Unthinkingly his hand went to the pocket of his flannel shirt and dropped quickly as he glanced at March. The latter was apparently absorbed in watching the waves as they ran with a long, easy sweep up the chattering shingle.

But March had seen the motion and guessed its significance. "You didn't ask me to paddle you over, Dick, but I will, if you've got to go."

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Relief and perplexity commingled in Baird's face as he considered the offer. He wanted to accept. In fact, he felt that he hardly dared refuse. March had risen, and as Baird glanced up, he saw his friend smiling good-naturedly before him.

"Come on, Dick. The wind may pick up some, but it is n't ugly yet."

"Thank you, Steve," replied Baird tardily.

"He's got it on him somewhere," thought March, steadying the canoe while Baird crept gingerly forward. Button, following his master to the canoe, made frantic efforts to scramble over the side. Finally March, who had intended leaving the dog at the camp, tossed him in amidships. "All right, Dick!"

They worked alongshore and out beyond the sandy point where the full, regular sweep of the seas met them. Once away from the tumult of the grounding waves the going seemed easier. When they were halfway across the lake the wind shifted, forcing March to change his course. He ran quartering to the seas at as wide an angle as he dared, alternately watching the color of the water ahead and the distant tree-tops. Slowly the canoe crept along, working to leeward, both men kneeling and paddles swinging. Again as they passed a distant point the wind veered and March

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labored heavily to keep the boat away from a stretch of water where an occasional grim, fin-edged hog-back of sunken rock alternately glimmered and disappeared. His plan timed to a nicety, he would have cleared the hog-backs, had not Baird, fearful as they swept hissing within a foot of the last rock, foolishly thrust his paddle against it. March flattened his own paddle on the water as Baird's blade snapped and the canoe lurched grinding on the ridge. Amidships, a few splinters of cedar sprung up in the bottom of the craft. The next lift of the waves carried the boat free, but a ring of tiny bubbles pulsed in the wash of thin water over the break.

"Slide over the thwart — easy," called March. "Now, work back and sit on the break."

Baird, stupefied by the accident, obeyed mechanically. "Busted my paddle —" he began.

"Sit still and don't hang on to the gunwales," said March. "It's going to blow some more."

The canoe, leaking badly, sagged and lurched as the black, rippling swells crept higher and higher along its dripping sides. Baird bailed steadily. March, knees braced, sweated, despite the cold wind, with the exertion of holding the heavy-going canoe bow-on to the waves. He teased the stubborn craft slowly ahead, the paddle bending to the breaking point at each stroke.

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The rising wind, bellowing through a notch in the hills, leaped at the cringing spruce-tops of the slope, and spun on down over the lake. Ahead, the whitecaps danced to its lash like a corral of wild horses. After a half-hour of slow, desperate progress, March called against the wind: "She won't make it! We'll have to come about and run for that point!"

As they topped a wave and slid staggering into a hollow, he threw his careful strength into a few quick strokes. Baird sat breathless as they swung quartering over the next wave. Stubbornly the canoe came about and lunged forward, the shifting water in-board all but upsetting it. Then, in a moment, the wind hushed to a low, volleying hum.

"Steady, Dick!" cried March as Baird, deceived by the false truce of the winds, glanced over his shoulder.

"Look, Steve!" he cried. "Behind you! Look!"

Hissing like rain in the flames a long, sliding wall of black water ran toward them, pulseless from its curling rim to the far shore from which it so unaccountably sprung. Between it and the canoe the waves were melting in its absorbing sweep.

"What is it?" cried Baird, fascinated by the rushing horror.

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"Don't know. Never saw anything like it, inland. Regular tidal wave." March steadied the canoe and drew off his moccasins. He tightened his belt with a quick twist. "Kick off your shoe-pacs, Dick. When it strikes, jump clear of the canoe. She'll sink anyway."

Some few hundred yards ahead loomed the spray-washed point. As March estimated the distance, he caught the glimmer of the tents on shore.

"Can you swim, Dick?"

"A little."

"I'll get Button started right. Take it easy."

He glanced back. Then he grabbed the dog, drew up his feet, and jumped as the canoe dropped away from him. It rolled over sluggishly and a few bubbles simmered on the waves. With a long, easy heave the water lifted them, rushed past and raced to shore, groaning as it burst on the rocks and shot up in writhing jets of spray. When March came up he saw Baird ahead of him. Then he let go the little dog. Button, his short legs going, bobbed over the waves like a giant water-bug. March spoke to him. The beagle rolled his great, frightened eyes toward his master, but swam steadily on. "He'll drown," thought March, as the dog slid into a soughing hollow and all but disappeared.

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Then the wind, pitched in a higher key, flung wave after wave upon the three moving dots in the water. March, swimming with a slow, overhand stroke, noticed that Baird was weakening. "Stick to it, Dick!" he shouted. "Canoe coming — over — by point."

A wave roared in March's ears, passed him, and he saw Baird go under. "Can't make — it," gasped the latter and his arms moved feebly. As he sank, March swam slowly forward and twisted his fingers in the drowning man's shirt-collar. Baird struggled, endeavoring to pull himself up on the other's shoulders. The collar tightened and Baird's head drooped. March felt that he himself could not last much longer. The spray blurred his eyes. The sagging weight he towed, added to the weight of his water-soaked clothing, drew him lower in the wash of the waves. A whitecap broke over him and he came up gasping. A second wave gurgled in his ears. As he rose on the slant of the next, he saw a canoe chopping against the seas, two kneeling figures urging it toward him. Then a high-pitched voice cried, "Mak' to ketch dat bow. Ah got dat chien."

A distorted sense of humor awoke for an instant in his drowsy brain. "Got the dog. Good for Button."

Then he felt a muscular hand grip his wrist as

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he grasped the gunwale. "You hol' heem?" queried the man in the bow. "Den we drif' back een dees win'."

Stern first, with paddles going easily they drifted to shore. It seemed hours to March before he felt his feet drag on bottom. He let go of the canoe and pulled Baird up on the rocks. Poised on a stranded timber he saw the figure of a girl, who ran toward him as he staggered from the water. Then he heard her cry, "Why, it's Dick! My cousin Dick!" Dimly he remembered stretching himself on the sand. He saw a blur of figures and heard voices. Presently the girl was kneeling above him. He took the flask from her hand and drank. "Don't give Dick any," he said weakly, "till you've got the water out of him. Roll him — over — log."

His overtired heart lifted to the whip of the stimulant. "Get a fire going," he called to the figures kneeling above Baird. Then he rose and walked dizzily to the group. "Get dry blankets." The girl turned and hurried to her tent. The two guides arose, and March, turning Baird on his face, clasped his hands about his middle . . .

While the girl was gone, March was tucking something that looked like a soggy fold of paper into his pocket. Baird, slowly recovering, became sick.

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Later, as March sat shivering beside the fire, he began to take accurate notice of his surroundings. The figure bringing wood resolved itself into Little Jules, the Free River Frenchman. That brown, stolid shape squatting on the rocks beyond was one of the Indians he had seen at the settlement. March rubbed his hand across his eyes, then gripped his shoulder, gently rubbing his arm and chest. The feel of his own bulk was reassuring. Then he glanced at the girl. She sat with her knees drawn up and her hands clasped around them, gazing out across the lake. He studied her profile, trying to remember when and where he had seen her before. Something in the glint of the golden-brown hair, the curve of the girlish cheek, the shapely fullness of the wrist and arm, seemed perplexingly familiar. She turned her head and met his gaze. She arose and extended her hand.

"I'm Arlis Hope," she said simply. "You're Mr. March, of Vancouver, are you not?"

March, smiling, shook hands with her. "I've got that quarter yet," he said, suddenly recalling the incident of the Pullman at Burnt Creek City. "No," he added, "I belong in this state. I was just home from Alaska."

"You're Mr. Baird's guide?" she asked, nodding toward the blanketed figure beside the fire.

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"Not exactly. We've been together, camping on the lake for a few days."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. You see, Mr. Baird is my cousin. He's Mr. Townsend's nephew; Mr. Townsend, of the Hope-Townsend Camps."

March nodded. His perplexity was warming to astonishment. Arlis Hope, John Hope's daughter! Baird had spoken of waiting for a friend that was going into the Whisper Lake country. Evidently this was the friend. A girl—the girl of Burnt Creek, who had laughingly given him the coin he had tossed up to send him here. The fact that she had been able to obtain the very guides that had refused to go with him made it plain that the Free River folk knew more of Whisper River than they pretended to know. Realizing his position, a natural constraint held him silent as he gazed at her.

Misinterpreting his preoccupation as being the result of fatigue, she said with a warm friendliness that far outweighed the natural courtesy of the invitation: "Of course you will make yourself at home with us. Have Jules get anything you want. There are spare blankets in his tent. We will make you just as comfortable as you will allow us."

"I'll get along first-rate," said March. "And I think Dick will be all right in the morning."

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"Poor Dick. I do hope so. He isn't very strong, you know. I saw the canoe upset — and that wave — and what you did. Jules and Joe Toomey did not dare put out until the wave came ashore. It's fortunate you were with Dick."

"Yes," he replied in a tone of decision that puzzled her; "it was fortunate."

That evening as the girl stepped from her tent to speak to Little Jules, she hesitated as she saw him gazing at March, who stood, back toward them, talking to the Indian. The little Frenchman was dumbly shaking his head. About to question him, her fingers flashed to her lips and her face flushed to the level of her grave brown eyes.

Toward midnight the storm drew off, leaving the battered shore silent save for the soothing monotone of the shallowing waves. Baird, awakening, leaned on his elbow and gazed at the ruddy welt of firelight that glistened on the wet sand, shone out over the lake in a wave-dappled path of gold, and faded to a wavering radiance in the gloom. Beyond was night and the viewless eastern ranges, and beyond them the farther mystery of Whisper Lake. He thought of Arlis Hope sleeping in the tent beyond. Her fearlessness, her grave determination to go to her father, de-

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spite the hardships and hazards of the journey, touched him deeply. He pushed the shirt back from his slender forearm and gazed at it, smiling bitterly. He longed to be the physical equal of Stephen March, then perhaps Arlis would not treat so lightly his sincere determination to help her. When she had told him, some months before, of her determination to go into Whisper Lake to her father, and he had insisted on accompanying her, she had said kindly, "Dick, it's a strong man's work to travel in that country. You are a good boy, Dick, and I do appreciate your kindness, but you had better not go." To this he had replied that he thought he could stand it as well as she could. He could not forget the unintentional sting of her answer: "Dick, I'm stronger than you and you know it." Which was true enough. Arlis Hope had the splendid physique of the girl who spends much of her time in the open, to say nothing of the inherited fibre of her New Hampshire parents. Again Baird thought of Stephen March, and turned his head to gaze at the silent, blanketed bulk beside him in the tent. Moccasins scuffed across the sand and Little Jules threw wood on the fire, looked into the tent, nodded and slunk wearily to his strip of browse beneath a canoe.

Baird yawned and shivered. A sense of some

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vague, impending catastrophe oppressed him, attributable, he thought, to his recent terrifying experience. Again he turned to look at March, who slept heavily. Then he remembered that his own clothing was hanging outside, as he felt the coarse texture of the guide's shirt that March had made him put on. "Probably lost that paper when I went overboard. Wonder if Steve has missed it?" He lay back wearily, reasoning that no good would come of telling Arlis who March was. She had worried enough, thinking of her father. "Steve pulled me out. I'd have gone down, sure. I have n't played square with Steve, and now, confound it, I can't. We can't stop him, but if we can get ahead of him — only a day. . ."

He leaned over and touched the sleeping figure. "Steve!" he whispered.

"Wh — what's the matter?"

"Sorry to disturb you, old man —"

"Sick?" queried March.

"No. I'm feeling better, but I could n't sleep."

March yawned and sat up, gazing dully at the fire. "Warm enough?" he asked.

"Yes. Say, Steve, it was mighty white of you to pull me out of that lake to-day. It was all my fault and you lost your canoe."

"No!" exclaimed March. "But I have got to get another boat," he added.

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"Yes. And if you can't get one at Free River Settlement, you've got to take mine."

"All right, I will. Thought I'd take Little Jules with me and go over and get our stuff in the morning. I'll send him back with your outfit and boat and paddle down to the settlement. Perhaps I can get another canoe there."

March's natural manner inclined Baird to believe that he had not missed the warrant. A commingled sense of gratitude and guilt flushed his pallid face as he put out his hand.

"I hope you won't think I'm soft, Steve, but you're about as white as they make 'em, and I want to shake hands with you."

March laughed good-naturedly, extending a broad, warm palm. Guessing that Baird, in his nervous condition, was drifting toward a confession, he abruptly changed the subject. "I met that little cousin of yours once before, Dick. I just want to say that she's a Jim Dandy. She doesn't get rattled and she doesn't try to boss things either. Just natural, like the woods we were talking about the other day. I wouldn't blame a fellow for doing anything, from robbing a hen-roost to holding up a mail-train, for her. I'd like to be a friend of hers."

"Steve knows," thought Baird, "and he's decent enough to put it that way." Confused by the

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thoughts which volleyed through his mind, he again extended his hand. "Good-bye, Steve," he said, when he had meant to say "Good-night."

March, drifting to sleep in the flickering light of the fire, puzzled drowsily over his friend's last words.

CHAPTER XI

"GONE"

THE storm of the preceding day had polished the sky till it shone like an arc of gray steel round a cloudless, sharp-edged morning sun. The glowing level of Pleasant Lake spread to dull amber where the reflected sun burned in its centre. Beyond, toward the farther shore, the quiet waters deepened to soft black in the distant coves, still slumbering in the shadows of the eastern hills. Along the beach, dotted here and there with the glistening bulk of a stranded log, ran a wavering brown line of foam, clotted with particles of broken bark, twigs, and the sediment washed from sunken and decaying timbers. A tinge of autumnal freshness was in the still air and a hint of frost gleamed palely on the rocks alongshore. The bright fingers of October, overreaching their appointed season, had already touched the maples on the ridges with faint scarlet flames. Less frequently the red deer came to the lakeside where the great togue, stirred from the drowsy depths by the chill of the waters,

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swam nearer the surface. With twinkling wings the wild ducks sped across the sky and vanished in the sheer gray nothingness of space.

March, arising quietly, stepped from the tent and helped Little Jules get breakfast, after which they slid a canoe into the water and paddled across the lake. Leaving Jules to return with Baird's boat and equipment, March paddled on down to Free River settlement.

Meanwhile Baird, apparently himself again, was urging the lateness of the season as a reason for immediately breaking camp and beginning the journey to Whisper Lake.

"But your friend, Mr. March?" said Arlis. "And he has Jules's canoe."

"I lost his for him. I don't believe he'll be back for a day or two. Jules can have my canoe. It's all in the family."

"Are you well enough to go on with us, Dick?"

Baird bit his lips. "Yes. And keep going on, forever — with you."

"Dick, you promised not to —"

"I know," he said, shaking his head ruefully; "but I can't help it."

"Then try to help me by being a good — cousin," she said, after a slight hesitation. "I'll tell Jules and Joe Toomey to pack."

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY'

When March arrived at the settlement, all of the Indians and nearly all of the breeds were away, either in the distant lumber-camp, or spotting trap-lines for the winter. He could neither buy nor borrow a canoe. Every craft of the kind seemed to be in service. There was an Indian, so the storekeeper told him, who was expected to return next morning. He might sell his canoe, as he was going to carry the mail to and from the settlement that fall and winter. When the Indian returned, he refused a fair offer for the boat, making several eloquent excuses for not selling.

Toward noon March decided to confiscate the canoe he had. "I'll see Dick first. I don't think he'll object, but if he does, I'll have to come out flat and talk business. He may offer his own canoe, but that boat isn't built for this kind of travel."

While purchasing his supplies at the store he asked casually if there were any paddles for sale, anticipating an immediate reply in the affirmative. To his surprise the storekeeper shook his head.

"Ain't got a paddle left, except those," he said as March gestured toward a stack of paddles behind the counter. "And them's all sold."

"Well I've got to have one. The paddle I

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have now used to belong to Little Jules and it's about a foot too short."

"Little Jules?" said the storekeeper, grinning his disbelief.

"Yes. That's his canoe down at the landing."

"Oh, that's diff'runt. If you're going in with Jules —"

"I'm not. I'm going in alone," said March.

"Well, I ain't got none."

"To sell," added March. "But I'm not going to buy one now. I'm simply going to borrow two. I'd need a spare paddle anyway." Then he placed his hand on the counter and leaped over it. "Go and fuss with your mail," he said as the storekeeper shouldered up to him. "I'm tired of being turned down by the citizens of this village."

"You git out of here," said the storekeeper threateningly. "I'm postmaster, and I'll have you jailed if you lay a hand on me."

March turned his back on the irate postmaster and selected two paddles. "These will do," he said, walking round the end of the counter. Then he leaned forward and continued quietly. "Charge these up to Bob Scott, sheriff of Burnt Creek. I'm about out of cash. And just pin this in your daybook. The first time I catch you interfering with my work, or putting any one else up to in-

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terfering with it, I'll fix it so that your postmastership will stop, right there."

"Timber-cruisin'?" said the storekeeper sarcastically.

"Yes. For the State."

And March gathered up his supplies, swung the paddles to his shoulder, and strode out of the store.

When he came to the landing he saw two half-breed women and a man gesticulating and talking volubly near his overturned canoe. "More trouble," he muttered. "Howdy," he said, nodding to the group.

"W'ere you get dat canoe?" asked the breed.

"Little Jules lent it to me."

One of the women addressed the breed with a swift chattering which March could not follow.

"Jules hees femme she say dat you mak' to steal dat canoe," said the breed affably.

"All right," replied March. "Jules is up on Pleasant Lake. Want to go up and tell him about it?"

While speaking March had turned the boat over, loaded it, and now shoved it into the water.

"Ah tink Ah go an' say to Jules dat —" The breed, seeing that March was about to step into the canoe, put his hand on the other's arm. March whirled like a cat, seized the Frenchman by the

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waist, and stooping flung him over his head into the lake. "Go and tell him," he said, laughing, stepping into the boat and paddling alongshore. "I needed exercise," he reflected. "And I was getting mighty tired of being held up."

About noon he drew near the point where he had left Baird and Arlis Hope in camp. He looked along the edge of the shore for the familiar outlines of canoes, but there was no break in the even gray shore line. He peered beneath his hand, expecting to catch the glimmer of the tents in the cedars. Presently he landed and crossed the narrow point. "Hello!" he called. "Hello, Dick!"

His answer rolled back in quickening echoes from the opposite bank of the cove. Tents, canoes, guides, Dick Baird, Arlis Hope were gone.

"What do you think of it, Button?" The little beagle scurried from place to place sniffing. Then he padded busily to the water's edge, lifted his head and bayed.

"Exactly!" said March.

With the buoyancy of one freed from the clogging annoyance of indecision, he turned to the task of building a fire and cooking the noon meal, after which he re-packed the supplies, stowing his pack, rifle, and axe in the bow of the canoe. As he paddled away from the deserted

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camp, Button sat beneath the thwart opposite him, gazing at March with a quizzical expression in his big brown eyes.

"Glad you're happy," said March, stooping to pat the little dog. "You want to feel just as good as you can now, for I think it's your last chance for a week or so."

The canoe was soon a moving black dot creeping along the farther shore. The dot ceased moving and he had landed to get his tent and other belongings.

Near the camp he had just left, a red fox peered through the bending fern of the woodside, slunk with light stealth from the lacy shadows, and trotted along the deserted beach.

CHAPTER XII

THE TRAIL

MIDWAY up the stream on which March had first met Richard Baird, and sagging across it in a ridge of tangled twigs and branches, ran a beaver dam. Above it lay the dark, placid level of a pond, edged by gaunt skeletons of trees that stood bleached and dying in the overflow of waters. At a slightly higher level was another dam, with a pond above. From level to level toiled March, unloading the canoe, dragging over each dam and loading again. By noon he was above the ninth and last pond. Here the stream narrowed, showing a hard, pebble-strewn bottom. On the spreading roots of a tree he rested and ate his noon "snack."

The stream wound through the dense forest, its margin rugged with grim boulders that lay immovable in the grip of tortuous cedar roots. Between the scored, brown trunks of the slanting cedars hung sagging stretches of dank, vivid moss treacherously masking innumerable pits and hollows mined by the snow-fed torrents of early

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spring. In the chaotic shadows on either side of the stream lay bulk upon bulk of fallen, rotting timbers;—huge formless monsters shrouded in coarse gray moss from which the uplifted, shrunk roots groped blindly skyward through the gloom. From twig and branch, from bole and root and stub, dangled a funereal drapery of inert gray streamers.

March, embarking after a brief rest, poled the canoe up the winding, green-roofed cavern of the water-course, at times against a current that swept silently over the face of embedded granite or dashed clamoring round shallow, pebbly bends. Frequently he unloaded the canoe to "carry" past a "pitch" where the waters leaped over sharp, splintered ledges and fell with a soft roar in the pools below. Always the click of the pole and the lilt of tumbling waters, as dodging, turning, checking, and again shooting ahead, the canoe worked slowly up the divide. Hour after hour he swayed to the thrust and recovery of the pole, now exerting his quick strength to force the craft against a stretch of fighting current, again teasing the swinging bow craftily past the sinuous drift of a cross-current, alert, yet working with the ease of confidence and rugged strength.

Mid-afternoon, and the water-course grew darker and steeper, narrowing until the inter-

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woven branches arching above the stream made it almost impossible to see a way through. From the east, toward which he toiled, came a faint gleam of outer light. The banks spread to easy slopes and the crowding trees gradually dwindled to patches of alder interspersed with low, rounded hummocks of rank grass. A bend in the stream and he paddled out on a wide expanse of stagnant water, black-edged with bog. Running the canoe deep into the rasping sedge, he stepped out, dragged the boat clear of the water, and, shouldering his pack, leaped from hummock to hummock toward the solid edge of the distant forest. Button, unable to follow over the bog, whimpered plaintively, invisible in the deep grasses. Dropping his pack and axe at the woodside, March went back for him. When they again came to the forest, Button squirmed joyfully at his master's feet, and March, relaxing from the tension of the day's work, took the little dog's muzzle in his palm. "Button," he said playfully, "they've got ahead of us — this far, and between you and me and the . . . girl, here's hoping they beat us clear to Whisper Lake. But we've got to go through, Button. It's straight business from now on."

The wan light of a late moon flickered through the trees and drew a welt of silver across the bog.

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The numberless small noises of the night ebbed and flowed. A mink, swimming along the margin of the pond, dove quickly as a shadow fell on the stagnant black water. The shadow moved toward the overturned canoe, snuffed and slunk away. Button, tucked at March's feet, poked his head from the blankets and growled. The shadow squelched heavily through the bog and was gone.

"Some country up here, eh, Button?" and March drew the blankets over his shoulder. "But you go to sleep. That Johnny Bear is n't after you."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEVEN GATES

NEXT morning, March, climbing to a ridge above the pond, came suddenly upon an opening in the stunted growth that covered the height-of-land. Below him the ridge dropped abruptly for a short distance, then swept down in a long, graceful curve toward the east. The dim horizon line, serrated with the wooded peaks of far hills, swept round in a great, unbroken circle. Within its indefinite compass lay mile upon mile of unspoiled forest. The tree-tops, massed and interwoven by distance, smoothed to a vast fabric of undulating green, across which wound a thin, gray thread that marked the gorge-rimmed course of a river. Somewhere in that placid immensity lay the hidden level of Whisper Lake.

As yet, March had found no signs of travel above the beaver-dams, surmising correctly that Jean DuBois knew a shorter route to the headwaters of Whisper River. That Little Jules and the Indian did not know, or for some reason had not used the shorter trail, was evident in the fresh

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moccasin tracks and occasional broken bushes that finally led him to a thicket of swamp-cedar where he discovered the dry bed of a stream. Farther down the slope a trickle of water shimmered between the worn stones. Then a pool, and below it ran deeper water. He waded alongshore looking closely at the half-submerged rocks. Presently he stooped to examine a smudge of paint on the round of a boulder. "Dick's canoe," he said; "the Indian's was slate-color."

Satisfied that he had found the headwaters of Whisper River, he returned to the pool above, ate his noon meal, and spent the rest of the day lugging his outfit down to the shallow stream.

Next morning, even before the heavy mist had lifted through the dripping branches, with rifle, axe, and spare paddle lashed to the thwarts, he put in and dropped the canoe through the shallow reaches, wading alongside. Later, when the sun had burned through the cavernous gloom of the branches, he stepped into the canoe and eased it down the ragged, twisting channel. Shooting swift, shallow pitches and checking in the heavy water below them, ever twisting and turning, from level to level he sped, enjoying his work as only he can to whom the unknown is elation and to whom a twelve-foot setting-pole is as a wand in the fingers.

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The cool, clustering branches drew apart as he ran from reach to reach, and before the long, spear-tipped spruce-tops on the southern bank had found their shadows in the water, he was paddling quickly down a widening river that swam through the dark-walled solitude with a silent onward rush. The current ran treacherously smooth over sunken rocks, a paddle's length beyond which broke swirling ripples — dilatory warnings whose diverging rays melted quickly in the swift, silent flow. "Black water," he ejaculated. "Black water and a raw sun. Bad combination." He grinned as the canoe grazed an unseen ledge. "That's the answer."

Button, with twitching nose resting on the gunwale, took soulful delight in registering the innumerable new fragrances that drifted from the shrouded, hurrying shores. All at once he grew uneasy, tilting his nose higher and higher with audible disapproval of some unseen menace. March, intent upon the river, suddenly noticed the little dog whining at his feet. "What's the trouble, Button?" he said kindly, glancing from shore to shore. Even as he spoke the depths of the woods reverberated with a low, far thunder. With a lift of his shoulders he drew in a great breath. "Sounds like Gate number one. No, Button, you need n't be afraid. We're not going to

bull through it. We'll get out and look it over first."

The banks grew higher and steeper as they approached the rapids. Riven from the shore stood huge arrow-heads of granite, shouldered into the stream by some ancient and terrific convulsion. To March these imposing, isolated fragments meant only an unpromising change in the character of the river. He ran the canoe ashore and climbed the low cliff which angled sharply to the left. Below him lay a boiling streak of rapids, dotted with rocks and ending where the narrowing channel pinched the waters to leaping gusts of spray. He clambered down the cliff, embarked and deliberately swung into the current. Standing, he looked down the gorge, paddling for the first leap of the rips. The canoe tossed on a crest and crashed into the back-lash of the first lift. Driving his paddle through the churning foam, he dodged to a second and a third ridge, his face set and dripping with spray. The roar grew to a steady ominous pounding as he dashed toward the narrows. "Go it, you Moosewash!" he shouted as the canoe lifted on a black, bubble-clotted ridge and hung for an instant. He caught the sickening glimmer of a honeycombed rock and felt the canoe touch and tremble. Another wave lifted him free, washing inboard over the stern. Then,

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with head down and straining shoulders, he drove his paddle through the prisoned fury of waters and jumped the canoe into the very centre of the thundering outlet. Like a fish-hawk the little boat swooped down, soared on the rise of the boiling crest, and swept easily out on the spreading current below. He felt the drag of a steady keel as he drifted in a listless level eddy toward the shore. Wiping the commingled sweat and spray from his face he looked back once. "Button," he said to the drenched and trembling dog, "Little Jules was correct. 'No mans w'at leeve mak' to pole de canoe up dat discharrge.' We surely won't come back up this brook."

He ran the canoe ashore, emptied it, and made his noon meal. For an hour after he had eaten he loafed, stretched on a shelving ledge, smoking contentedly. Before him the river ran smooth and deep, its silence in strange contrast to the drumming tumult he had passed. As he had worked, so he rested, heartily. Occasionally he thought of Arlis Hope, Baird, and the guides. "Got a feeling that Little Jules don't make it. He's unlucky. It shows in his face. Wonder which canoe the Hope girl is in. The Indian's, I suppose."

He pictured Arlis Hope, her brown hair gleaming with spray, her bright face pale with the tension of uncertainty, but withal sitting bravely

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quiet as she swept through the seething chaos of the rapids. "Now, Dick," soliloquized March, "he'll just shout like a Piute full of red pepper. He's different."

He rapped his pipe on the rock, stood up, and stretched lazily. "In you go," he said to Button, who stood watching March launch the canoe.

The river walled up rapidly, running swiftly between dank, sweating cliffs that thrust no foothold from their slimy bases save where infrequent, fallen masses of rock clogged the flow that snarled past their jagged edges. Deeper and deeper into the sounding gorge sped the canoe. Despite his actual nonchalance, March felt inexplicably subdued as the low, reiterant echoes played from every angle of the cliffs. The creak of the thwart as he shifted his paddle from right to left, the rasp of the paddle on the gunwale, the lisp of the bow cleaving the black water, each infinitely small sound stirred to flight a flutter of mocking voices that drifted from rocky wall to wall in melancholy and incessant murmuring. "Whisper River." He looked up at the rift of blue, sharp-edged by the cliffs, to where a solitary fir leaned from the high rock, its black, elbowing branches vivid against the strip of sky. A distant, soft throbbing soon drew his eyes to

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the level of the river. The cavern's whispering was about to cease.

As the current quickened he stood up and peered ahead. The cliffs seemed to meet in a blank wall of rock. Already he felt the slow rise and fall of waters checked abruptly. As the canoe swept toward the barrier of the cliffs he saw the river, specked with bubbling dots of white, mass in a great wave and run shivering up the rocks to fall back booming like the tides. Still standing, he stooped to his paddle, undecided as to whether he should endeavor to make the sharp angle of the bend on the ebb or flow of the waters. That indefinable instinct, that so often aids the fearless, stood him in good stead. Whatever lay ahead, he would "take it on the run." The six-foot strip of rock-maple bent to his thrust like a whip as he forced the canoe away from the cliff. The flash of his paddle, another quick stroke, and he swept round the abrupt turn and slid over a simmering level, on which rose great blisters of water that boiled and spread to the sides of the rock-walled pit. Even as he reached for another stroke he felt the canoe dropping away and swinging. Then his face went white as the boiling surface of the waters sunk with a sucking roar to a horror of spinning black walls that widened and bored deeper and deeper. With an effort that

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crimsoned his face and spread a network of veins on his forehead, he fairly jumped the little boat past the outer edge of the whirlpool. Below, the liberated waters volleyed through a ragged barrier of rocks. He saw an opening as he swung quartering across the current. With the heave of his shoulders the canoe darted between the swirl above a sunken rock and a grim, shouldering bulk of granite, and dodged down a gentle slope of chattering, quick water. As he slowed to the widening river he sat down, easing his shoulder muscles with a shrug. "Button," he said, "I came pretty near getting scared that time. Thank God, we had that little old boat moving when we hit that soomer."

The chasm opened out, gradually easing to tree-covered slopes, the river spreading from its modulated current to deep shore reaches of dead water. The afternoon sun played indolently on that broad, pulseless floor of black, in angled rays of amber, saffron, crimson, copper-red, edged all along the southern bank with myriad reflected tree-tops burdening its passive depths — dull green in a soft black underworld.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WRECK

FOUR times, at short intervals, the river narrowed. Each time March rose to scan the quick water ahead and choose an instant way through. The broken white and black, the nuzzling rock, and the swift turmoil gladdened him. Anything rather than another coiling treachery like the whirlpool . . .

He mentally tallied each "rift" below the first two unforgettable "gates." Below the last of the four pitches, he sat with his paddle across his knees, filling his pipe. His broad shoulders relaxed, and he gazed ahead with a listlessness that masked the quick working of his mind as he summed up the day's experiences and recalled Jean DuBois's advice to keep to the left in running the seventh "gate." "Wonder if the Frenchman was trying to help me out, or steer me into a smash-up? There's something coming. I can feel it. I've kept dry so far—and that's too much good luck all at once in this kind of work. This last gate has something more to it than any of the others."

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Like many of his type he scoffed at superstition openly, while secretly cuddling a pet superstition that the not infrequent forewarnings he felt were derived from some indefinite exterior source rather than from his own imagination.

Unconsciously he swung to his paddle, driving along at a steady clip. Far ahead he could see a dot in the river that finally took outline. At first a clog of granite, it swelled, as he drew nearer, to a small island thatched with scrubby trees. Nearer still he found it to be steep-sided, apparently long and high. It split the stream into almost equal channels, one swift and unruffled, the other showing ragged white as it rounded the northern bend of the island. March lifted his paddle and listened. The deep hum of distant falls droned through the bordering trees, so low and heavy in its trembling diapason that sound itself seemed lost in its reverberations. DuBois had advised him frankly to take the left-hand channel. "Too frankly," thought March, as with his setting-pole he snubbed the canoe gingerly down the right side of the island. A dead leaf flicked past and he watched it, estimating the swiftness of the current. Frequently his pole slipped and slid on the smooth bottom of the river-bed. Swifter the current ran until the little boat trembled at each forward thrust of the pole. He knew the unmis-

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takable sound of falls as distinguished from the shouting challenge of navigable rapids, yet he wished to assure himself on which side of the island the falls were. Just above a jutting knee of rock his arms shot forward and he leaned heavily against the drag of the canoe. Quivering upright in midstream was the broken half of a setting-pole wedged in some crevice of the river-bed. His eyes narrowed. A short hundred yards beyond, and with scarcely a ripple from shore to shore the river poured into space. Above its smoothly rounded horizon-line clouds of mist welled up and up from the dull, perpetual thunder below. With each movement timed to an admirable deliberateness of accomplishment, he stepped over the two middle thwarts to the bow of the boat, faced upstream, still holding the canoe with the pole. With his first thrust, the iron-shod pole slipped and the canoe dropped back a length. A hot sweat prickled on his neck and forehead. He held steadily as the pole grated over the granite bottom. Again he thrust quickly, the pole took hold, and with a long, powerful heave and a quick shifting of hands he made up what he had lost. Foot by foot, with muscles tense and eyes fixed on the bow of the craft, he gained against the current till he reached the head of the island. Here he crossed to the left-hand chan-

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nel and worked cautiously down to the quick water. The branch he was on led sharply away from the falls as the island broadened, crowding the stream toward the north. He knew that there must be some long reaches of heavy water, perhaps falls, before the river eventually met its own level again. The rapids ahead seemed limitless as he gazed down the distant stretch of rock-strewn, tumbling white. He flashed past bend after bend — always the tossing crests, the steady rush of wave-washed rocks creeping up from the distance, marching toward him, flashing astern.

The rush, the rise, the sudden pitch, the rumbling shock as the canoe ground over an unseen boulder, the brief second's relaxation of tense muscles, the driving cross-current that slewed the boat quartering as it sped, the quick, wide strokes of recovery, the plunge between foam-rimmed rock and rock, the blurred endless shoreline sweeping on and on . . . No moment's rest, until the wild, unending monotony grew to a numbing burden that wore him from man to brute. Reason quailed before naked brute courage. He shook his head like a wounded moose that charges till it drops. One hand flashed to his neck and he tore his shirt open at the throat. His face a mask of sweating bronze, his massive chest glistening white in the dusk, lips drawn

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rigid across his teeth, he knelt in the stern of the canoe, a thing of eyes and hands. A dull pain tugged at his throat and subsided as a wave lashed over the bow and broke, spattering his naked chest.

At last, when the great muscles of his arms, burning with the ache of the ceaseless labor, seemed all but beyond answering his will, he shot past the lower end of the island and floated out on the broad, glassy level of the main river. He flung his paddle into the bottom of the canoe and brushed the dank hair from his forehead. Then he scooped water with his hands and drank again and again.

"Holy biscuits!" he gasped. "Holy—" And he rocked back and forth, laughing, till Button, with frightened eyes, backed beneath the thwarts and crouched in the bow, growling. He gazed at the dog unseeingly. Presently he stammered, "Here, Bu-Button—Here, Button, don't be a fool just because I am." Slowly the little dog crept toward him. March put out his hand and Button nuzzled it timidly. Then he knelt and bailed the boat as it swung drifting in an eddy.

Twilight drew down along the verge of the forest and, creeping into its depths, became night. An owl called from the inner darkness. Button,

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looking up at the enshrouding trees, growled valiantly. March laughed and spoke reassuringly to him. The canoe, running near the bank, struck a yielding something that dragged heavily in the shallow water near the shore. March leaned forward, peering through the gloom. He backed the canoe, swung it round, and beached it. Then he waded out and stooped over the dim bulk in the water.

"God Almighty!" he exclaimed, straightening up and shuddering. Crumpled like a twisted newspaper, half the side shorn away, with rags of canvas hanging from the crushed and splintered cedar ribs, lay the wreck of a canoe. He cut a shred from the canvas and stumbling to the shore gathered firewood. In the blaze of the fire he examined the rag of canvas. "Green!" he said; "Dick's canoe. He's gone — and Little Jules. Knew there was something coming before I saw that broken setting-pole above the falls."

He squatted by the fire, turning the bit of canvas over and over with nervous fingers. He started as the dog, creeping closer to the warmth, brushed against him. He recalled Baird's last talk with him on Pleasant Lake; how he had proffered his hand and said, "Good-bye," instead of "Good-night." He gazed dully at the flames. "Guess it was 'good-bye,' after all," he said

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slowly. For the first time he felt the desolation of night and loneliness. The battered canoe—that was nothing in itself. But the blind, sodden shapes that lay somewhere beneath the black water . . . And one of them . . . Dick . . . his camp-fellow.

He stood up and stepped out to the low point on which he had landed, listening, peering through the dusk, hoping against reason to see the glint of a camp-fire or hear the sound of voices. Over the eastern hills, slender and beautiful in its silvery pallor, crept a carved radiance gliding close to the dim black line of the forest. As its soft light touched the widening expanse of the river below he uttered an exclamation. Spread upon the night like a pool of jade, and seemingly almost within calling distance from where he stood, lay the moonlit waters of Whisper Lake.

His tired pulses quickened as he gazed. "Cheer up, Button!" he said, striding briskly to the fire and unlacing the pack. "Our troubles have just begun. But we've got to eat and we've got to sleep, no matter what happens."

CHAPTER XV

"FOR DICK"

BUTTON poked his head from under the canoe and looked at his master, who lay sprawled in a heavy sleep. A light morning wind hurried along Whisper River, tingeing its monotonous black with patches of silver-gray. The ghost of a sun burned dimly through a mottled sky. The chill air was heavy with dampness. Overhead, the boughs rocked sluggishly and a tiny whirlwind spiraled the dead flakes of last night's fire, till a fresh gust drove them flickering through the trees. The little dog, approaching March with the stealth of uncertainty, licked his face. March started up with a gasp, striking his head on the edge of the overturned canoe. "D—d — Hello, dog!" he said, rolling from under the boat and sitting up. "Hungry?"

Button leaped playfully at him, worrying his sleeve and growling. March rolled him over and held him flat on his back. The kicking legs subsided to a limpness of submission that the mischievous, rolling eyes denied. March stood up. "Rain," he said, breathing deeply. He pitched

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the square of canvas that he used for a tent and stowed his few belongings beneath it. Then he carefully examined the wrecked canoe. Wedged in the splintered angle of the bow he found Baird's crumpled felt hat. He twisted the water from it and tossed it among his things, hiding his real feelings under an assumption of brusqueness. "Foolish thing for them to take the chance." "I don't blame him, though," he added after a pause. "But it's pretty hard for that little Hope girl, if she's alive." *Was she alive?* The thought, the possibility of her having been drowned, drew his black brows together and he cursed the sequence of events which had led him to Whisper Lake.

He kindled a fire and made breakfast, after which he chopped a fallen cedar in short lengths and stacked the wood under a tree near his tent. As he worked he determined to make this river-camp his headquarters until he had found out what had become of the other members of the party. Following his decision, a sense of loyalty to the man he had so recently camped with urged him to make an immediate and more satisfying investigation of the accident. Possibly Baird and Little Jules were alive — perhaps they were on the island. But the twisted and battered canoe, spread almost flat on the river-edge, caused him

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to doubt his own hopefulness. Should he paddle across to the island and walk alongshore to the falls? "It's no use," he said finally. "But I'll do it — for Dick."

At his command Button slunk beneath the tent, which March made secure against the threat of rain. Landing at the foot of the island, he labored along the shore, wading shallow coves, clambering up ledges and over fallen trees, always keeping to the edge of the impassable tangle of brush and stunted growth that covered the ridges and gullies of the interior. He chose the bank that bordered the rapids, recalling vividly his glimpse at the bluff wall of rock that edged the opposite side above the falls.

Noon brought a heavy down-pour, making the difficult going even hazardous. Mid-afternoon, with its ceaseless wind and driving slant of rain, found him crawling like an ant over the rugged shore-line, drenched and aching but indomitable. Once a heavy gust hurtled against the glistening, brown tree-trunks, and a huge hemlock lurched from its honeycombed base and thundered to the rocks, its splintered top lashing back and forth in the rapids. He climbed through the twisted branches and plodded on with grim, unreasoning persistence. Presently he heard the distant, soft roar of the falls above the sharp volleying of the

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rain. He stopped and shaped his hand to his ear, listening. Then he laughed, glancing toward the river. "Thought I heard a call. Must have been the rapids. Wonder if there are any deer in this neck of the woods?"

Near the head of the island he stepped out on a ledge that bit sharply into the current and looked alongshore. Nothing but rain-washed rock and driftwood to the next point. He glanced from rock to rock through the low spray of the beating rain. A bit of unusual color at the foot of a spruce puzzled him. Suddenly, with hands clenched he sprang from the ledge and ran stumbling toward a blotch of brown and white. Huddled beneath a tree lay a forlorn, girlish figure that moaned as he knelt and lifted the bowed head from the crossed arms.

"It's all right," he said. "It's me. Stephen March. Are you hurt?"

The dull heavy eyes opened and closed again wearily.

"I'll get you out of this, Miss Hope. Stand up. That's right."

He lifted her to her feet, but she sagged lifelessly in his arms.

"Oh!" she moaned, clinging to him. "Dick . . . Dick . . . is drowned . . . and Jules . . ." Her hand closed over her eyes and she shuddered.

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"I know," said March quietly. "Try not to think of that now. Besides, I want you to help me."

A gleam of astonishment broke through the dullness of her eyes.

"You! Help you!" She stepped back and leaned against the tree. "Oh, Dick! It was my fault . . . my fault," she sobbed.

"I don't think so."

March's terseness stung her, as he had wished it to do.

"You don't understand," she said, gazing at him dully. "Dick is dead . . . and Jules and Joe Toomey."

"What! The Indian too?"

Notwithstanding his desire to make her think of the present need for shelter and rest, he could not hide his astonishment at her assertion.

"I've got a canoe at the foot of the island. I managed to get through all right. We've got to get to my camp. You're about done. Had anything to eat since —"

She shook her head.

"Oh, anywhere. Take me anywhere — away from this horrible place. Last night — alone — and Dick over there," and she shuddered as a lift of the wind brought the sound of the falls.

March motioned to her and turned toward the

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river. She followed him dumbly, her face drawn and white, robbed of its reliant youthfulness and altogether pitifully changed. Numb to the chill of the rain she toiled behind him over the slippery rocks, through the shallows, under and over logs, he, as he helped her, mentioning the different landmarks he had passed coming up the island. Frequently he glanced at her white face, fearing to believe that her strength would last until they came to the canoe, but she followed him doggedly. Early night drew quickly in under the haze of rain and they struggled on more slowly, March plodding close to her in the gathering darkness. At a bend in the shore, without a word or sign, she dropped to the rocks. He lifted her in his arms, finding her, even in his great strength, heavier than he had imagined. He staggered over the rocks blindly, trusting to his quickness to save her in case he fell. He felt her inert body grow warm against his breast and shoulder. "Just a kid," he murmured. "All the woman frightened out of her." Twice he stumbled in the darkness, dropping to his knees. Each time as he rose he spoke to her reassuringly, as though she were able to hear. Presently through the blank beat of the rain he heard Button howl dismally. Again he heard the plaint of the dog quavering across to him from the mainland.

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"Well, we're here," he gasped, "wherever that is."

He found the canoe and, laying the unconscious girl in it, paddled across to camp, where Button came whimpering down the rocks and nosed the drenched burden that he laid gently beneath the tent. Making a fire was a matter of tedious labor. Finally he coaxed a flame with birch bark, and fed it craftily. By its light he found and split the cedar and soon had a brighter blaze. He made strong coffee and tried ineffectually to revive the girl. Startled, he put his hand over her heart. "She's alive," he thought; "but what that little girl has gone through on the island — alone all night and nothing to eat since day before yesterday! No wonder! Perhaps sleep is better than anything else just now."

He dreaded to think that she might be out of her mind when she awoke in the morning. The fire-light flickered on her white face, as she lay, her lips parted, scarcely breathing. March smoothed the tangled brown hair back from her forehead clumsily. "I'm going to take off that baby's coat and skirt and wrap her in my blankets. Likely she'll be mad, but it may save her life."

The rain slackened to a drizzle, that dwindled to a mist and at midnight a raw wind had opened star-specked seams in the tumbling gray over-

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head. By the lively flames sat March, drying the girl's clothes. Opposite him the taut walls of the tent glowed ember-red and a faint, reflected radiance tinged the girl's pallor. Her heavy hair, drawn back from her face, lay wet and shining across the white of her outstretched arm.

He arose and stepped quietly to the tent. Stooping, he watched the faint throb of blue in the full curve of her throat. He lifted the upturned, limp fingers to his lips. "Just a kid," he murmured, drawing the blanket over her naked arm and shoulder; "all the woman frightened out of her."

As he stood looking down he thought of the morning at Burnt Creek City when she had laughingly tendered him the twenty-five-cent piece. Something deeper than pity for her helplessness stirred his heart as he thought of his mission and the final outcome of his journey to Whisper Lake.

A fluttering sigh stirred the blankets above her breast. Her eyes opened. "Where am I?" she asked, drawing her hand across her forehead.

"Tucked up snug and safe. I'm Stephen March. You're in my tent down here on Whisper River. Feel cold?"

"Yes," she whispered, shivering. "Where's Dick?"

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"Asleep," said March.

She gazed at him with widening eyes. "Oh, I remember, I remember . . ." She turned her face from him and lay still.

He went to the fire and threw on more fuel. As the flames snapped at the dry cedar, Button came yawning from beneath the canoe. He nosed the garments that March held before the flames. Then he trotted to the tent, hesitated with one foreleg crooked, and crept up to the girl. She started as his cold, soft muzzle touched her hand. Then she drew the little dog to her and he snuggled contentedly in her arm. March turned his head and gazed toward the river. For a while he heard the girl sobbing. Imperceptibly the sound of her grief drifted into the regular breathing of sleep.

Through the long, gloomy hours he sat, smoking and now and then feeding the fire from the pile of fuel at his hand. Patiently he turned the sodden garments to the flames, trusting them to nought but his own hand, that they might not burn and that they might become thoroughly dry. The firelight flickered in broad black distortions across the white-walled tent. Toward morning he gathered the clothes together, folded them neatly, and placed them beside the girl.

"What will make her real mad," he solilo-

FOR DICK

quized, "isn't that I've dried her cl . . . , but that pair of my socks on her feet — they did look funny, and her feet were so little, and cold."

He contemplated his own broad moccasins and almost laughed.

CHAPTER XVI

COMPLICATIONS

IN the gray of the morning, March took his rifle and slipped into the rain-heavy underbrush. Perhaps an hour passed before a blunt, forest-lulled report sounded somewhere back in the woods. Button, stepping gingerly from the tent, and stopping frequently to shake the wet earth and pine-needles from his feet, prowled round the camp and returned to the girl, who still lay sleeping. Sniffing along the blankets he approached her cautiously and pawed gently at the edge of blanket covering her shoulders. Her eyelids quivered and presently she was staring at the little dog in an effort to remember where she was. Then she sat up, glanced at her naked arms, saw her clothes, dry and folded, and her face flamed. Dressing hurriedly she went to the river and bathed her hot cheeks in the chill water. As she arose from the rocks at the river's edge she reached out dizzily for the support of a low branch. For a moment all went black before her eyes, and then slowly the tent, the smouldering

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fire, the canoe, and each dripping tree took shape. Near the fire she found some camp-bread and fried pork. After she had eaten a little and hung the tea-pail over the fire, poured for herself a cup of strong black tea and drunk what she could of it, she felt better able to meet March upon his return. Used to the woods, and noting that March's rifle was not beneath the canoe, she anticipated that he had gone for fresh meat. Around her the silent forest seemed sullenly inert and desolate. The keen and cold September rain had chilled the earth and air and the alternate shifts of morning sun and shadow served but to emphasize the bleakness of the place. Whisper River, grim and swollen by the rain, lapped alongshore, lifting the wrecked canoe and floating it out on an eddy that turned slowly with its dismal burden of shattered wood and ragged canvas. Intrenched in her own grief she had not thought of the canoe itself, until, glancing up from where she sat by the fire, she saw the battered wreck. She watched its slow turning with heavy eyes, that filled with tears as she thought of Dick and Jules and the Indian, each wrapped in the black mystery of the river's depths, asleep . . . forever . . . And yet she felt that should they appear, laughing and talking as they stepped from the canoes and greeted her, they would not

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at that moment seem unreal. "I must not think of it!" she cried, "or I shall go mad."

So intent was she upon the vivid scene of the catastrophe as it flashed before her mind, reiterating in all its gruesome detail the horror of the falls and the lonely night on the island, that she did not hear March as he returned to camp lugging a yearling buck. For a moment he stood, stooped beneath the weight of the deer, watching her. In some subtle way she became aware of his presence and turned.

"Good morning!" he said cheerily. "I'm mighty glad that you're able to be up and about."

"I was nearly famished. I know that sounds heartless after yesterday — and the day before — but one must eat."

"I'm glad you *wanted* to eat," said March. "You didn't find much there," he added, pointing to the fire. "I'll have a nice steak ready in a minute."

She sat on a log gazing listlessly at the embers of the fire while he cut up the meat. She felt relieved that he had accepted her presence so naturally. She knew, without reasoning, that she could trust him. With the sure instinct of womanhood she had already divined that his inner self was wrapped up in a purpose that held him in a direct course which her presence could not affect

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one way or the other. With elbow on knee and chin in hand she sat looking at the fire, beyond it, and on out through the woods, to where, like a vision, lay the dull gray of Whisper Lake.

"It would n't be of any use to go back, would it?" she asked.

March, looking up from his work, shook his head. "No," he said. "Unless you think there's a chance —"

"I was only trying to hope we could do something. Why did you come back to the island?"

"To look for Dick. I found the canoe," and he gestured toward the river, "and I did n't know for certain, then."

"I saw you run the rapids at the head of the island, day before yesterday. I called, but you were gone so quickly. And of course you could n't hear me."

He glanced at her face. The eyes were level and her mouth was firm.

"Shall we have it out now?" he asked.

She understood him, and nodded.

"How did you get on the island? Where's Joe Toomey, the Indian?" asked March.

She answered with a quiet sadness and self-restraint that touched March more than had her tears.

"He went over the falls trying to save Dick

and Jules. Little Jules broke his setting-pole. I think it caught in some crevice, and they upset. Even then they nearly got out. Jules clung to the broken pole and Dick had hold of the canoe. It caught on the rocks above the falls. Joe Toomey made me get out on the island, where you found me. Then he crossed over to the falls and I followed him. Oh, he worked so hard. Dropped his canoe down to Jules and past him to where Dick was. Dick got in, but I think one side went under and it was partly filled. Then they worked terribly to get up to Jules. I think Jules was too frightened to understand that they were coming back for him. He let go the pole and jumped toward them, and then . . . I saw Dick . . . he waved to me . . . And then just for a second, I could n't look. The canoe rolled over and over . . . ”

March saw the tears gathering in her eyes and asked hurriedly: “How did Jules happen to take the wrong channel?”

“The mist,” she answered. “Both canoes were together above the island. We could see it plainly. You know how swiftly the river runs as it divides. Then a bank of mist rolled up from the falls toward us. It was gone in a minute. Joe Toomey called to Little Jules. Dick answered. They seemed to be ahead of us. I heard Jules

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cry out, and then the sun broke through the mist."

She was breathing quickly and her fingers writhed together.

"Yes?" said March.

"Little Jules saw his mistake. He had been holding the canoe with the pole. Dick was back-paddling and all at once the canoe swung sideways . . . and the pole snapped . . ."

The girl's head drooped to her knees and Button crawled to her and nuzzled her clasped hands. March turned away and busied himself packing some of the meat for the canoe. "One great girl and one damned white Indian," was his silent comment as he worked.

On one pretext or another he left her alone for the rest of the morning. At noon, after they had eaten, she came to him where he knelt packing the outfit.

"Let me help," she said. "Let me do something. I'm quite used to camping and canoeing."

"There is n't much to do," replied March. "We're traveling pretty light."

He rolled the blankets, gathered the few odds and ends, and with the tent as a pack-cloth, made a secure pack.

"Can you shoot?" he asked, without looking up from his task.

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"Yes."

"Swim?"

"Yes."

"Trek on snowshoes?"

"Of course. But why do you ask?"

"Well, I can see by the way you do things that you're pretty handy — for a girl. I was just wondering —"

"Whether we would ever get out of Whisper Lake country?" she said anticipating his thought.

"I'm not afraid to answer that, knowing you don't scare easily. Yes, I was thinking it might be some time before we found a way out again."

"I have been in the woods a great deal — with my father," she assured him. "He's the lumberman, John Hope."

"I've seen him at Burnt Creek — some years ago," said March.

"He's camped on Whisper Lake now," she said. "He has been sick. That's why I'm going in to see him. He needs me."

March, busy with his own thoughts, made no comment.

The girl, standing near him as he loaded the canoe, said presently: "Why did you risk so much to get to Whisper Lake?"

"I did n't know that river then like I know it now."

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"Yes. But Dick said you were timber-cruising. And it's going toward winter. Surely you didn't intend to winter up here?"

"No. I didn't."

"Then why —"

He interrupted her almost childish persistence gravely: "I'm going in *now*, to take you straight to your father." He hesitated and looked out over the river. "And then —" He was about to tell her of his real mission in that country when a sense of her loneliness, her absolute dependence on him, caused him to add, "Look over the country a bit. There's some big timber up there."

"But isn't it late in the season for that?"

"Yes, it's late for that. But it isn't too late to help you take care of your dad, or you, if you need me."

She laid her hand on his arm. "Mr. March," she began, and her lips trembled, "it seems that you were meant to help me ever since that morning at Burnt Creek City. Why it should happen so is more than I can understand, but it has happened and is happening. I feel as though I could never repay you —"

March straightened up from bending over the canoe. "Pay!" he exclaimed. "Why, I have been paid in advance. I've got that quarter yet. As for helping you, why, I'm going to make a regular

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job of it till you ask me to resign. You and Button get in the bow and we 'll drop down-river."

The irony of her having expressed herself as under an everlasting obligation to him bit deep into his conscience. His feelings found relief in physical expression as he drove his paddle through the water with a lift that made the canoe leap and tremble. He cared more for the girl than he would admit, even to himself. A little breeze blew up the river and swept a tendril of brown hair across her cheek as she half turned to speak to him.

"Got a hunch," he soliloquized, lapsing into the vernacular of the mining-camp, "that I'll get fired dizzy quick when she finds out — and she will, for I promised Scotty to see this game through, and I'm going to stick."

"Do you know Jean DuBois — Big Jean — ?" she asked.

"Yes," replied March. "And I think he remembers me."

CHAPTER XVII

WHISPER LAKE

THE dull granite bulwark that belted the northern half of the lake broke abruptly at each end of its brown semicircle to the glittering grayish-white of a wide, sandy beach, lined with shingle at the water's edge and on the forest side, creeping between low bush-growths to the black loam of the higher level of timberland. Toward the south the shores ran narrowing to the green of reed-bordered marshes. Beyond the marshes and sweeping for miles to the south and west, lay a harlequin blanket of withered moss and shimmering pools, the great muskeg, desolate, treacherous, and seemingly impassable. The muskeg's secret, a caribou trail which led from one pool to another, and finally to the cedar-crowned level of firmer ground, was known to the big Frenchman, Jean DuBois. Over this trail, impracticable as a route by which to enter the lake with a loaded canoe, he was wont to return to Pleasant Lake, toting his empty canoe from pond to pond, and eventually entering Whisper River above the rapids.

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Across the lake, and opposite the mouth of Whisper River, was the little cabin which DuBois had built when John Hope had first come to him, fleeing from the imaginary terrors of a retribution which he knew was just, in the letter of the law, but which he felt would be morally unjust, were the circumstances known. He did not fear justice, but feared the law, backed as he knew it would be by the evidence of a score of careless-mouthed and hot-brained lumbermen. He had hidden himself from men, not because he felt that he was wholly guilty, but rather because he knew in his own soul that he was in a great measure innocent. The year that he had worn away in solitude, save for the infrequent presence of Jean DuBois arriving with provisions, had taught him the folly of his decision not to face the consequences of his act at once. He had all but determined to return to his home in Burnt Creek City when he was stricken with a fever that he fought until increasing weakness forced him to take to his bunk. For three days he had turned and twisted restlessly on his rough bed of browse when Big Jean arrived with supplies and a letter from Arlis. She had heard from DuBois that her father was not well, and stated that she was coming in to Whisper Lake to care for him and induce him to return to his home.

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Fumbling with the letter, he glanced at the postmark and the date. "They ought to be here, Jean. Something's gone wrong."

The Frenchman arose from his seat by the doorway and scanned the gray barren of the lake, then came to the figure lying in the bunk at the back of the cabin. He looked down on the broad, feverish face, in which the eyes, straining sideways toward the door, showed dull and blood-shot.

"You t'ink dat Mees Arlis she com'?" he asked.

"Think? My girl *said* she'd come. You brought this letter. I can't stop her. She generally does what she says she'll do."

"Ah t'ink mabbe dey come sometaime," said the Frenchman soothingly. "You mak' to sleep an' Ah look."

"Sleep? My God, if I *could* sleep!" Hope twisted his shoulders and sat up. The effort crimsoned his face and he dropped back with a groan.

DuBois watched him for a moment. "Mabbe you com' an' look," he said, gesturing toward the lake.

The peculiarly mottled color of Hope's face had puzzled and alarmed DuBois. He wanted to see Hope in the full light of day.

"What good 'll that do, Jean?" grumbled

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Hope, nevertheless getting slowly to his feet and following the Frenchman to the door.

DuBois glanced sharply at him. The skin on the sick man's forehead was drawn to a shiny pallor and touched with little pink spots, white-edged and imperceptible in the dusk of the cabin.

"Ah t'ink Ah stay h'out een dees win'," said DuBois, as the other, after a long look at the lake, returned to his bunk.

"Stay where you dam' please," growled Hope. Big Jean turned in the doorway.

"Mabbe it good dat she don' come."

"Good?"

"Oui. Dat wan bad rivaire — dat Whispaire Rivaire."

"Yes. But Toomey's a good man. He'll take care of my girl."

"He vair' good mans — dat Joe Toomey. An' you vair' seek mans, Ah t'ink."

"Just found it out, Jean?"

"Non. You haf be a leet' seek for long taime. Ah don' t'ink dat."

Hope, startled by the suggestiveness in the Frenchman's voice, jerked his head toward him.

"What's that? What's the matter with me?"

The Frenchman hesitated, and Hope, restless in his fever, again slipped from the bunk and came toward the door.

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"You stay een de shack!" commanded DuBois, thrusting a broad palm toward the shivering figure.

"You—you afraid of me?" Hope's grizzled beard bristled round a hideous grin.

"Non. Ah no 'fraid of b'ny mans. But Ah 'fraid of dat petite vérole — what you say, de small-pox."

The old man staggered back to the darkened corner of the cabin, one hand groping along the wall. He dropped to his knees. "The judgment of Almighty God," he muttered. "And my girl's coming . . ." He covered his face with his hands and sat huddled sideways against the rail of the bunk.

DuBois, peering in at the doorway, crossed himself.

Presently Hope got to his feet. "Don't let them come—come in here," he stammered. "Stop them! Tell Arlis—"

"Ah no can stop dem fraum com'," said DuBois quietly. "Ah see wan canoe on dat lake."

"My girl! Arlis!" cried Hope.

His hands faltered and he dropped to a quaking heap on the bare puncheon floor.

Over the steel gray of the autumn lake glided a canoe, a furlong from the eastern shore. DuBois studied the oncoming craft critically. "Dat

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ees Mees Arlees, Ah t'ink—but dat no' Joe Toomey. Dat"—and he edged his palm above his eyes—"Dat ees de beeg Marrch, by Gar! W'ere ees dat Jules and Joe Toomey?"

As the bow of the canoe grounded in the shingle, the girl stepped out, glanced at the cabin on the slope above, and asked DuBois, who had come down to meet them, where her father was. March was surprised to hear her address the big Frenchman as "Jean" with a friendly familiarity which the latter reflected as he replied:

"Your père he seek mans. He ees een dat cabane."

"Oh! I must go to him," and she moved toward the cabin.

"Non!"

The Frenchman's manner puzzled her.

"Oh, Jean, tell me, is he alive?"

"Mo'sieur 'Ope he vair' seek mans, Ah t'ink. Oui, he h'alive."

DuBois had turned and was addressing March.

"Then please let me by, Jean."

"Non!" he said sharply. "Non!" and he barred the way with his arms wide and his great bulk towering above her.

"What is it?" she cried, drawing her clenched hands up toward her face. "What is it?"

March stepped forward. "See here, DuBois,

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what's all this? Miss Hope wants to see her father—"

"You keel moi — Ah don' care for dat, but Ah say to Mees Arlees dat she don' go een dat cabane."

A choking cry from the slope above and John Hope stood swaying in the doorway. Arlis, slipping past the Frenchman who had turned at the cry, sprang up the path toward the cabin. As March saw, his lips shaped to an utterance that was lost in the deep breath he drew as he leaped up the rocks and grasped the girl's arm. She turned on him with white anger burning in her face.

"Can't help it," he said coolly. "You're not going in there. The Frenchman was right. It's — it's small-pox."

The horror of the very word itself stunned her. She seemed unable to speak or move, but stood gazing helplessly at March's gaunt, brown face.

Gently releasing her arm he said gravely: "We can't help things if we all get down with it. I'm going in — and take care of him. He's out of his head now. You get DuBois to pitch the tent."

"But I *must* go to him." She raised her arms toward the ghastly figure in the doorway.

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"Father! Father!" she cried, pity and anguish burning in her tearless eyes.

John Hope, with the blind stare of delirium, took one step toward her, to meet March's hand on his chest, thrusting him back.

"I'm in for it now," he said, urging Hope into the cabin. "You get back into your bunk, quick!"

The old lumberman obeyed mechanically, muttering in monotonous repetition: "The judgment of Almighty God."

"Judgment nothing," said March, with a brusqueness that did not cover his own horror and disgust. "It's too much pork and living like a greasy Siwash in this hole." Then as an afterthought and to himself: "Wonder if the Frenchman has caught it?"

He covered the sick man and came to the doorway. "We're in for it," he said. "But your father is built square. He will pull through all right. I've seen this sickness before — in the camps up North."

"Are you certain it is —"

"So sure of it," interrupted March, "that I'm going to have DuBois build a camp for you. We may be here all winter, if your father pulls through. He won't be able to travel in the snow, and the snow will be here before he's on his feet again."



YOU'RE NOT GOING IN THERE!

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"And you?" she said, dumb admiration struggling through the fear in her eyes.

"Me? It isn't the first risk I've taken. Guess it was lucky you gave me that quarter, after all."

She felt, rather than understood, that there was some half-humorous meaning to his reply, and she felt also that beneath his words lay the firm assurance of his willing service to her and hers.

"DuBois is pitching the tent. Send him for fresh water. When he gets back, tell him to come up here."

Dazed until her very feet seemed numb to the sharp rocks of the shore-path, she called to Button who was sniffing round the outside of the cabin, and walked down to the canoe.

The following week passed quickly. The big Frenchman, working from the gray of dawn to the dusk of evening had built and furnished with a rough table and benches a new cabin some few paces down-shore from the old camp. Despite the nerve-trying days and unrefreshing nights, Stephen March found the days slipping away all too fast in that they brought John Hope toward the crisis of his sickness. He knew that if the old lumberman survived the ninth day, there was a fair chance that he might recover. Even now

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the tide of fever and delirium was ebbing and March doubted his own ability to pilot the wreck of a man, that lay with bound hands before him, through the perilous shallows of that ebb-tide.

Arlis, arranging March's meagre outfit of camp-utensils in the new cabin, was almost happy in that March had assured her daily that her father was doing well. In the immediate tension of circumstance she set aside all thought of the future and lived hopefully from day to day, buoyed by the optimism of her youth, and inspired by March's unselfish devotion to her father. She had been speaking with Jean DuBois — had been thanking him for his faithfulness and kindness — and she smiled as the big Frenchman raised his hand in expostulation.

"No'sieur Townsen' he pay me for dat," said DuBois.

"Yes, I know that, Jean. But you have been more than a friend to us. You've run that awful river so many times, to bring in supplies. And you've been faithful. We can never repay you for that."

"Your père he sauf me wan taime w'en Ah mak vite weet twent'-two, t'ree mans een dat Burnt Creek plac'. Dey keel moi eef he don' come den. Ah dronk dat taime, Ah t'ink," he added with refreshing candor.

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"Mr. Townsend told me about it," said Arlis, smiling in spite of herself.

The Frenchman, despite his great size, had the naiveté of a boy.

"Now Ah mak traverse to Free Rivaire — an' get does t'ing wat you say. Ah com' back een four, fife day, mabbe."

"And for Mr. March," said Arlis. "He will have to have new clothes. Everything in the old camp will have to be burned when they come out."

DuBois was silent. Arlis attributed his taciturnity, whenever she spoke of Stephen March, to a childish jealousy, in that Big Jean, among the men of the lumber-camp, had been her favorite in the holiday adventures of sleighing and snow-shoeing. DuBois, anything but jealous of the other's "gran' courage" as he termed it, still bore a deep suspicion of March's ultimate intent should John Hope live to make its fulfillment possible.

Each morning she went to within a short distance of the other cabin and called to March. When he appeared, always quietly cheerful and reassuring, she listened to his account of her father's condition with an eager and steadfast gaze that had in it a questioning beyond his answers. Commingled with her solicitude for her father was a voiceless fear for the man who had

so unhesitatingly entered that darkened doorway from which he might never come. But of that she dared not think.

The day before DuBois left for Free River, and while she was sitting on a rock at the water's edge watching him patch his canoe, March came quietly to the doorway and looked down on them from the camp above. The girl's attitude, as she leaned forward, her elbow on her knee and her hand propping her head, which was turned sideways and away from him, checked the question on his lips. He had intended asking DuBois about the trail out from Whisper Lake to the Settlement, realizing that in case of accident to the Frenchman, they would be prisoners, indeed. Something in the inanimate, pensive turn of her head, with its heavy golden-brown braids rippling forward over her shoulders, held him silent. He closed the door quietly and returned to his seat beside the blurred heap beneath the blankets. Half-dozing he sat looking at the oblong of sunlight through the narrow, unglazed window, following the rays to where they spread softly over the dark, wide-seamed floor. Presently he arose and padded to the little room at the rear of the camp. At the clang of the pan which fell as he opened the door of the small sheet-iron stove, Hope started and crawled from his bunk. March,

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hearing the creak of the floor behind him, strode toward the sound. Gently he forced the sick man backward.

"It's all right," he said; "lie down. I was just going to boil some water for your bath."

"All right?" cried Hope, in the high, querulous wail of delirium; "all right? It's murder — and so help me God, I did n't mean that."

"Never thought you did *mean* it," said March, looking down at the dim, square face. "You're not that kind of man."

John Hope's wavering eyes steadied to a glare. "Who are you?" he asked, licking his swollen lips.

"The judge," replied March, with a desperate but happy instinct. He was thrown off his balance by the recurrence of the delirium. "The judge, and I pronounce the prisoner not guilty."

"Not guilty," quavered up from the blankets.

"The court finds the prisoner not guilty," repeated March. "And says that he ought to go to sleep."

The old lumberman, staring at the slit in the wall of the cabin, suddenly raised his arm. Something brushed along the logs outside, and March turned to look.

"Slink Peters," said Hope, reaching out toward the square of sunlight, "Slink Peters, take off

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your hat. I know you! No, I won't touch you. Hold on! Hold on! Tell them you ain't dead. Tell them . . ."

March, startled by the other's reference to the gum-picker, slipped quickly to the door as the voice behind him trailed off to mumbling incoherences. The girl sat, as he had seen her last, her palm propping her cheek. DuBois was intent on his work of patching the canoe.

"The old man's off his head again — bad. But I thought I heard something," he said to himself.

Then he returned to the back room and kindled a fire.

DuBois, straightening up from the boat, glanced quickly toward the forest. Arlis Hope turned her head looking from side to side. Over the quiet of the afternoon came the echo of a song, irregularly, as though the singer were walking as he sang. Arlis, listening intently, caught the words: —

"But . . . if he comes . . . down here ag'in,
He . . . won't go back."

"Jean, who is it?" she cried, even as the Frenchman, dropping the pannikin of pitch with which he had been mending the canoe, leaped up the rocks and plunged into the woodside.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE "JEDGMENT"

ODDS makes even, when you git four of 'em."

Slink Peters was gazing with a kind of insane intensity at Louis Britt, who was seated on the doorstep of a trapper's cabin and "squaring up," with a crooked knife, a strip of white ash — a snowshoe bow in the making. The hand holding the crooked knife drew steadily down the long white wand.

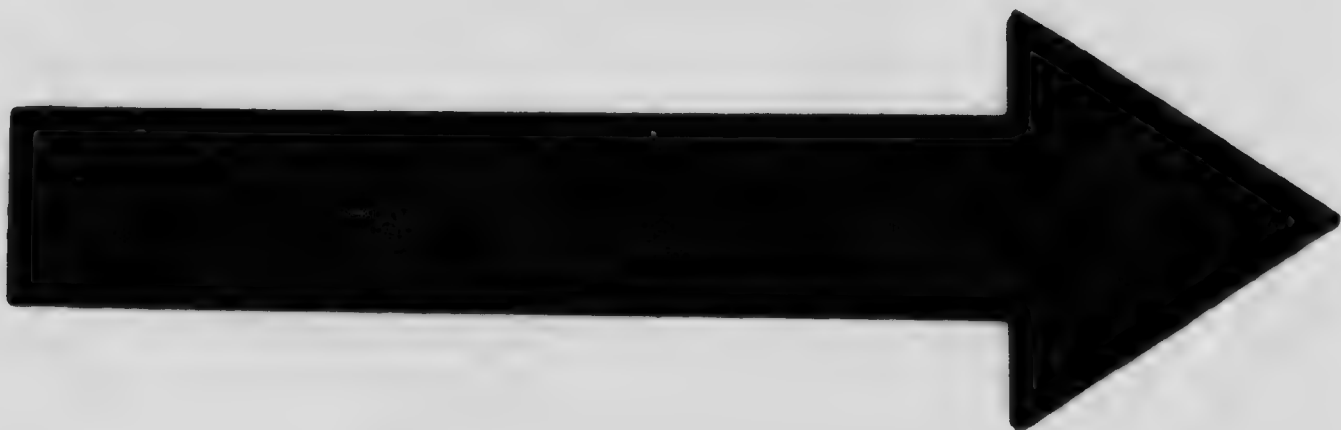
"Uhuh," grunted the snowshoe maker, leaning forward for another stroke. "That's what I said, ain't it? What's the odds, now we're even with him, of *stayin'* even?"

"They's *four* of 'em," exclaimed Peters. "That's even, ain't it?"

"You're gettin' nutty ag'in," growled the man in the doorway.

"Three of 'em's men — jest like me and you," persisted Slink. "My head's hurtin' ag'in, Looie. Hurtin' suthin' turrible."

"Hurtin' you bad enough fer a drink of liquor?" asked Britt, without looking up from his work.



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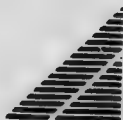
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"I don't want no liquor," replied Peters. "'Cause you ain't got none."

"That's her!" replied Britt. "Ain't got a smell. You drunk all they was."

"I *seen* 'em," said Slink. "Three of 'em's men — an' the other one is . . ." He hesitated and raised his forefinger impressively, gazing, meanwhile, at the top of Britt's black felt hat. "The other's a . . ."

Britt looked up. "Spit it out, Slink, if it don't taste good. The other's a *what*?"

"A gal!" whispered Slink, stooping toward his companion. "A gal jest like angels. White ones — with yella hair and wings."

"Uhuh," grunted Britt. "Did you trail 'em to that camp you 're talkin' about by the feathers?"

Slink stared at his companion, who sighted casually down the strip of white ash and resumed his work.

"You think I'm lyin', Looie?" Peters's voice trembled with the intensity of a child's whose sincerity is doubted. "I ain't lyin', Looie — an' one of 'em's *him*."

The hand holding the crooked knife, poised for a stroke, stopped suddenly. "The hell you say!"

Peters grinned. At last he had broken through his companion's stubborn disbelief. As if to avoid some terrifying recollection, he hastened to add,

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"Him — an' he's dyin'. An' another fella with shoulders like this," and he squared his own stoop, trying to imitate the possessor of a pair of broad, well-carried shoulders. "And they's a Frenchman, bigger 'n that. And a gal like angels. Strike me dead, Looie, if they ain't."

The woeful abjectness of Peters as he talked and gestured touched Britt for an instant. "Poor, blatherin' cuss, mebbe he did see 'em," he muttered. Then aloud; "You 're struck near enough dead as you be. *I ain't sayin' nothin', Slink, excep', if you did see John Hope, what 's the odds of stayin' even with him. Like enough he'd kill you ag'in if he seen you.*"

"John Hope what killed a man," said Peters glibly. And he nodded with evident pride in his cleverness.

"Well, you dassent go nigh him, dast ye?"

The gum-picker shivered and looked round at the trees. Then he said boastfully as though for the benefit of an unseen audience:—

"Yes, I dast. I'm a jedgment, I am! Did n't you say he killed *me*?"

"Jest the same as," replied Britt.

"Then I ain't Slink Peters no more. I'm a jedgment. Jedgments comes on folks what kills folks, don't they?"

Britt's silence at this conclusion seemed to

please the gum-picker. He swelled out his chest and shuffled about with odd gyrations of pleasure. Suddenly he paused with one foot off the ground. With a sly twist of his head he eyed his companion.

"But *she* ain't no jedgment. She's like them," and he pointed to the sky. "All shinin' in her face, and white. Sittin' still on a rock and jest like cryin', only not cryin'. I reckon I ain't scared to go nigh her!"

"Say, Slink," and Britt's unshaven chin poked up as he looked at Peters, "are you jest tryin' to pester me, or be you talkin' straight?"

Peters planted his uplifted foot on the ground, and advanced toward Britt. With a half-serious, half-playful expression, followed by a quick gesture, he struck the ash wand lightly.

"As straight as that!" he said, stepping back quickly.

"Well," drawled Britt, "this here stick 's moughty nigh straight, exceptin' jest at the end. Mebbe you 're talkin' nutty, an' mebbe you ain't." He scratched his head gently with the handle of the crooked knife. "Where'd you say you seen 'em?"

"Over there," replied Peters, indicating the west.

"Whisper Lake?"

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Peters nodded.

"Like enough," muttered Britt. "Ole man Hope knowed that country some. Him and Big Jean, an' mebbe some of them Free River Injuns. But another white fella and a gal! Huh!"

Peters, nodding gravely at each word, exclaimed: "Strike me dead, Looie."

Slipping the crooked knife in a crevice near the door, Britt kicked the crisp shavings aside and stood up. "Slink," he said finally, "I'm goin' over the south line to-morrow an' I'm goin' *alone* this time. Understan'?"

Again Peters nodded.

"You're goin' to stay and keep the shack shet, so's no one gets in, 'ceptin' of course when you go out to get water. An' you kin b'ile these here bows and bend 'em. We'll be needin' 'em afore long."

Peters quietly accepted the unnecessary trust of keeping the cabin shut. In a vague way he realized that Britt meant more than he said. He would stay in the cabin until Britt returned. But beneath his compliance lay a sly intention of stealing away to Whisper Lake at the first open opportunity.

That night, as Slink tossed and mumbled in his bunk, Britt sat with a lantern at his elbow and a

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board across his knees, cutting strips from a square of rawhide. Occasionally he paused in his work and glanced toward the restless gum-picker. "Slink's sure seen suthin'," he said. "He's agoin' to have one of them bad spells. He's sure seen suthin'."

He gazed about the cabin. "Well," he said slowly, as he resumed his work, "she's a good-enough camp. I ain't got no kick, even if Slink is some nutty in his head. Livin' up in this country and bein' your own boss is a dum' sight better'n workin' for a lumberin'-camp. But I got to keep Slink from givin' us away. If he done *that*, it would be me fer the lock-up, sure as warts."

From the half-loft in the peak of the roof jutted the edges of "canned-goods" boxes, some unopened, others filled with assorted pieces of amber- and wine-colored spruce gum. A sack of dried apples hung from the ridgepole, out of reach of the mice. A bundle of pelts lay in one corner, beside a small molasses keg. A shadowy heap in another corner was a jumble of steel traps. A rough stone fireplace and a clay-and-twigg chimney, flanked by two narrow slits of windows, the bunks, one above the other, a small sheet-iron stove, a bench and a table topped with cedar splits,

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made up the essentials. Britt and his companion admitted one luxury ; that of absolute personal freedom. They had no agreement as to a working basis, nor a division of their labor or its slim profits. They hunted, fished, trapped, picked gum, and loafed. Britt, in satisfying his grudge against John Hope, had at first no plan beyond the moment. He had cared for the gum-picker as one might for a strayed and injured dog. After the fight with Hope he had taken Slink to a northern river-village over the Canadian border where they were unknown, and the simple habitants of the village had nursed the gum-picker back to the semblance of a man. When he was able to travel Britt had said simply, "Come." The stray dog followed, knowing no other friend. With no definite plan they had again crossed the Canadian border, and while exploring one of the many streams that ran into the northern reaches of Free River, had come upon a trapper, who, recognizing his kind, told them of the good fur country located round Beaseley, a clutter of cabins on the edge of the wilderness, some twenty miles east of the Whisper Lake timber-lands. That winter had found them harbored in their new cabin in the centre of a wide territory of uncut and untraveled forest. They had stumbled upon the only safe trail to the Whisper Lake

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country save the caribou trail over the muskegs, leading toward Free River Settlement, and known only to Jean DuBois.

Britt, bending over his work, determined to investigate Slink's "yarn." It might be true. If so, he would discourage the gum-picker from revisiting the lake. That would mean John Hope's emancipation, and that again might lead to discoveries that would be decidedly unpleasant for Britt, to say the least.

"John Hope had a gal. Arvis, or some sech name," he mumbled. "Used to come up to camp in the winter, I recollect'. That was when that big Frencher, DuBois, was workin' there. But Slink's off his head. Ain't no gal ever got to that lake, an' dum' few men, even if Hope is a-hidin' up here. Mebbe — but Hope ain't fool enough to let his gal come into that country. But I'll look around some. No tellin'."

With this conclusion he slipped off his moccasins, blew out the light, and rolled up in his blankets. In the bunk above him Peters moaned and muttered, dreaming of angels that floated down from the spruce-tops and almost carried him out of reach of a short, broad devil with a bleeding face, that came closer and closer . . .

As he shrieked, Britt started up. Grumbling he shuffled across the cabin, lighted the lantern,

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and went outside. He returned ; —there was the thin gurgle of liquid poured in tin, and —
“Here, Slink, drink her down.”

Peters swallowed a burning mouthful. “All of it?” he spluttered.

“Hog’s gravy! All of it? What’s gettin’ into you. Drink her down,” he growled, although not unkindly. “Then you’ll sleep black — an’ see nothin’.”

CHAPTER XIX

SLINK'S AWAKENING

LOUIS BRITT, returning from Whisper Lake, found the gum-picker contentedly crooning his ditty about "John Hope" and viewing, with no small show of satisfaction, the two sets of snowshoe bows, steamed and bent over the broad, oval forms.

"Did you see 'em?" he asked as Britt dropped his empty pack on the floor and began a hasty search round the cabin for tobacco.

"See which?"

"The gal — an' *him*?"

Britt scowled. "Said I was goin' over the *south* line, didn't I? What's bitin' you now?"

"Nothin', Looie," Peters replied conciliatingly. "I was jest thinkin'. Don't git mad at me, Looie. It makes my head hurt suthin' turrible when you git mad."

"Playin' foxy ag'in, hey?" said Britt, discovering a "hand" of plug-tobacco and biting a corner from it with avidity.

"I bent them bows, Looie," said Slink, bringing

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the forms to the woodsman, who had stretched himself in the bunk.

Britt examined the work critically. "Slivered the nose of that bow a leetle. What else 'd you do?"

Peters scratched the side of his neck, cast a glance at the cobwebbed rafters and replied timidly, "I — I *think*."

Britt laughed. "You 'll be gettin' too all-fired tony fer me — you and your thinkin'." He eyed the gum-picker curiously. "Sence when did you commence this here thinkin'?"

"Looie," replied Slink, with piteous earnestness, "I been tryin' to think ever sence you 're gone. I was bendin' over, steamin' them bows, and fust thin' I knowed suthin' give a snap, up here," indicating his head; "and I commenced thinkin' jest like water runnin'. Strike me dead, Looie." His eager expression changed to dismay as Britt laughed harshly.

"You 'll be seein' things ag'in, Slink, if you keep on thinkin' — an' the liquor's all gone. Ain't no more."

Peters twisted his lean hands together in dumb perplexity. "I 'm wantin' to see things, Looie. I ain't goin' to be scared no more."

"Ain't goin' to be scared?" Britt laughed again. Then he lied deliberately, watching

Peters's face. "Well, you better be. I seen John Hope. He 's livin' down there to Whisper Lake an' his hull fam'ly. Goin' to stay there. He said to me afore I left, 'Looie Britt,' says he, 'I come up here lookin' fer that red-headed, liquor-peddlin' gum-picker, an' if I ketch him ag'in, I'll fix him.' That's what he said, Slink Peters. So I reckon you better keep away from Whisper Lake."

Step by step Peters crept toward his companion as he listened. "But I seen him — layin' in his bunk, dyin', Looie. Strike me dead! I snook up to the winder, an' they was a man settin' in that leetle room to the back, and *him* layin' in the bunk. An' down by the lake was the gal like angels, and the other fella fixin' his canoe. An' a leetle dog — "

"Did any of 'em see you?" asked Britt.

Peters shook his head, and an expression of shallow cunning touched his features. "I *snook* up, when they ain't lookin'."

Britt shifted his legs to the floor and stood up. Annoyed at the reasonableness of Slink's recitation, which seemed to suggest that the gum-picker was becoming rational, he decided to assert his prerogative of ownership definitely. Underlying an imagined solicitude for Peters's well-being was a calloused determination to keep the gum-picker hidden and dumb. To Britt there

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was no moral aspect to the situation. Hope might have killed Peters, and Britt, making no allowance for motives nor his own dastardly provocation that drew Hope into the fight, condemned the old lumberman with all the furious bigotry of his kind.

"You, Slink Peters!" he said, shaking his clenched hand in the other's face. "If I ketch you goin' near to Whisper Lake, I'll kill you — fer sure this time!"

Much to his astonishment, Slink, instead of cowering in the far corner of the cabin as he was wont to do when Britt had had occasion to threaten him, stood his ground, and, grinning, said with old-time familiarity; "Aw, Lou, you quit your kiddin'."

And Britt knew that his hold on the other was loosed completely.

With the October snow came the necessity for attention to the trap-lines which kept them more or less together. One day, Britt, returning ahead of Peters, missed a pair of new snowshoes that he had recently finished weaving. "Slink's stuck 'em somewhere," he muttered with the shiftless indifference of his nature, and thought no more of it.

Next day they began a tedious journey to the

little settlement of Beaseley, where they were to trade for winter supplies. They camped at night in the forest edging the settlement and next day at noon they were in the settlement store. After trading their heavy packs of spruce gum for pork, tea, flour, molasses, and some winter clothing, Peters drew from the bottom of his pack two splendid, dark mink pelts. Britt exclaimed in surprise. Even the bucolic storekeeper evinced a degree of interest.

"What's they worth?" asked Peters.

"Number-One skins, all right," replied the storekeeper. "Mink ain't wu'th much now, though."

"They 's worth eighteen dollars if they 's worth lookin' at," said Britt, his professional intelligence overcoming his astonishment at Peters's individual attitude. Heretofore Britt had managed the trading. "They're right color and A-Number-One—an' the biggest I ever see."

"Give you ten in trade," said the storekeeper. Peters shook his head.

"Where'd you get 'em, Slink?" asked Britt. "You never showed 'em to me."

"Been a-keepin' 'em," replied Peters mysteriously, stuffing the pelts back into the pack-sack.

"Give you twelve. Twelve 's high fer mink. I got to sell 'em an' make suthin'."

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"Ain't you makin' suthin' on the grub an' stuff I git fer 'em?" queried Peters.

"I git fer 'em," soliloquized Britt. "Reckon Slink is comin' to. An' that shot about 'makin' on the grub.' What in the Ole Slip's gettin' into him?"

"Seein' as you fellas do your tradin' here, I'll go you fifteen."

The storekeeper picked up a sugar-scoop and waved it suggestively toward the shelves.

Peters slowly drew out the pelts and smoothed them, pondering. He glanced nervously at Britt.

"Kin I git *anything* you got fer 'em?" he asked, turning to the storekeeper.

"'Cept money." And the man behind the counter grinned.

"Then I'll be wantin' a axe —"

"They's two up to camp, Slink," interrupted Britt.

"Them's your'n, Looie. I'm wantin' a leetle one fer me."

"Dollar," said the storekeeper, jotting the item on the pine counter.

"An' one of them blankets," said Peters.

"Three dollars. That makes four."

"An' that shootin'-iron," continued Peters, pointing toward one of the rifles that stood racked behind the counter.

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Britt strove to contain himself. Peters's declaration of independence was imminent.

But the storekeeper shook his head. "Four dollars you got. Leaves 'leven. Thet gun 's wu'th fifteen and a half."

"'T ain't a *new* shootin'-iron," said Peters. "I kin see where the blue's worn off'n the britch."

"What you wantin' a gun fer, Slink?" said Britt. "I got mine up at the shack."

"I'm jest wantin' a leetle one fer me," replied Peters. "You ain't mad at me, be you, Looie?"

Disregarding his companion, Britt touched his own forehead significantly. "Weasels in his hen-coop," he said to the storekeeper, and he winked.

"W'ich gun do you want?" asked the trader, as Peters slowly pushed the axe-head and the blanket toward him and reached for the pelts.

"The fu'st one."

"Oh, that! I was thinkin' you wanted one of them new ones. I bought that off'n a sport goin' out las' fall. You kin have that one fer ten."

"'T ain't no good less'n I got ca'tridges. How much is ca'tridges?"

"Dollar a box — fer that gun. Twenty in a box."

"Reckon two boxes is all I want," said Peters.

Britt, catching the trader's eye, winked again.

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"All right, Mister. I don't make nothin', but here's your stuff."

And the trader shoved the cartridges across the counter.

Peters rolled the axe-head in the blanket and stuffed it in the pack. He was about to put the cartridges away when he hesitated, opened one of the boxes, and tried a cartridge in the chamber of the rifle.

"Don't fit!" he complained, looking helplessly at the trader.

Britt swallowed a curse and grinned.

"Let's see. Right you are. I made a mistake. Give you 44's fer 38-55's. Here they be."

After satisfying himself that the ammunition was suitable for the weapon, Peters gravely placed his purchases on the counter, and drawing another and smaller pelt from his shirt, offered it in exchange for the smallest pair of heavy, moosehide moccasins in the store.

Britt's disgust all but choked him. "What in codfish did Peters want with a pair of number three moccasins when he wore number tens?"

"Good-bye," said Peters, after he had arranged the supplies to his satisfaction. "Mebbe I ain't comin' back ag'in."

They left the store and trudged silently through the afternoon forest.

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Presently Britt, who had paused to adjust his pack, turned to Peters. "What in hell is got into you, anyhow?"

Slink's eyes wavered for a second. "Gettin' ready fer winter," he replied. "You ain't mad, be you, Looie?"

"Gettin' ready fer winter? Mad? No! You knock-kneed, long-gear'd pike-pole, I ain't mad. 'Course I ain't *mad*. Been takin' care of you fer a year—reg'lar sick-nursin' you like a kid. Saved your good-fer-nuthin' life, I did, an' now you're 'gettin' ready fer winter,' which is sayin' thet you're gettin' ready to quit me. Thought you was crazy when you *was* crazy, but now you're wuss then that. Oh, no, I ain't mad."

"Mebbe I be crazy," said Slink hopelessly. "Mebbe I be. But strike me dead, Looie, I'm commencin' to remember. And suthin' ain't right. Suthin' ain't right. Jedgments comes on folks what ain't doin' right, Looie."

"Gettin' religion," sneered Britt. "Nex' thing I know, you'll be a-murderin' me. Murderin' your ole friend Looie."

CHAPTER XX

IN THE FIRS

THE bleak dawn of a November morning gathered quick intensity as the sun lifted over the cold silence of the hills, sweeping the pallor of dawn from the inch-deep blanket of snow that lay in glaring patches beneath the dun haze of the heavy timber. Edged by irregular outcroppings of naked rock on one side and muddy gray water on the other, the white belt of winter wound round the shore-line of Whisper Lake. Across the water, opposite the two cabins, the belt narrowed to a thread beneath the slanting cedars. From the rounded levels of fallen trees the black knots and stiff, gaunt branches glistened fitfully as the thin white sheath melted imperceptibly from their spikes and angles. A faint odor of wood-smoke commingled with the raw tang of the air. From Hope's cabin came the muffled tread of moccasins, a door creaked, and Stephen March stood on the rough-hewn threshold breathing deep, awakening draughts of the morning freshness. His face showed little trace of his three-weeks' vigil, save a slight sallow-

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ness about his temples. His clear gray eyes, touched with a hint of humorous introspection, gazed at nothing in particular. He smiled as he imagined a conversation with his patient. He would say, "Well, Hope, now you're on your feet again, you had better come along with me. You're wanted." He pictured the utter consternation of the older man, who would say, "You! Stephen March! And after what you've done for me you're going to . . ." It was not at the tragedy of the situation he smiled, but at his own inability to do other than keep his promise to Robert Scott, the sheriff. "Feel just as if I was standing up and pegging rocks at myself," he said. "I'm four kinds of a fool, and then some." In this he referred to his growing affection for Arlis, who had developed a womanly fortitude, leavened by a quiet cheerfulness that increased his admiration for the girl as he had known her at first. He glanced toward the little cabin tucked in the edge of the forest down-shore. Through the trees rose an umber veft of smoke, and over the stillness of the early morning came the shrill "yip, yip" of Button, joyfully anticipating breakfast.

"My whole family is doing fine!" he said. "Moosemeat and dough-gods agree with 'em. If I felt any better myself, I'd want to call in a doc-

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tor. Hope's going to pull through. I suppose Arlis would give me thunder if she knew I tied his hands down. But it saved his face some."

From behind him in the cabin came a muffled question.

"No," he said, looking over his shoulder, "I was talking to myself. Arlis is n't out yet. She's getting breakfast. Jean? Oh, he's all right. He'll get here. Don't you worry. He ought to be back to-day."

He turned toward the lake again as the door of Arlis's cabin opened. "It's worth going through this," he said to himself as she came toward him over the snow, her bright face happy with the assurance of her father's recovery and glowing with the rich vitality of youth. A ghostly sunbeam glinted on the warm, golden brown of her hair, and rippled like water on the two heavy braids that reached below her finger-tips. The little dog, tucked beneath one arm, kicked vigorously to get away and run to his master.

"Button, you're a rascal. — Good-morning! How is father?"

"Bully!" said March, stepping down from the doorway. "He just asked for you."

"Can I come near enough to speak to him?"

March shook his head. "I would n't. I know

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how you feel, but you stay there and I'll be the interpreter. It wouldn't do to take a chance now."

After a question or two on both sides, she asked March when he thought Jean DuBois would get back.

"Expect him to-day," he replied. "How's the flour holding out?"

"There's not much left. But it wasn't the flour, altogether."

"Clothes?" he asked, smiling.

"I do need a few things. My moccasins are about gone. And I didn't expect to have to stay here all winter."

March frowned, puzzling over the possibilities of their isolation. He did not doubt but that they would all come out of the difficulty, but he realized thoroughly the girl's position. Forced to the false attitude of a "friend indeed," his frank nature rebelled against the necessary subterfuges of their daily life.

Arlis could see that he was perplexed and she reflected his mood as she said, almost against her will; "But if Jean does n't come back?"

"I'll see you through," he replied with a quick gesture of assurance.

"But your work — timber-cruising?"

"That can wait," he replied.

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She thanked him with a glance that warmed the blood in his cheeks.

"You had better not stand in the melting snow," he said. "It's worse than water."

She laughed. "You can't help being — a bit — ah — masterful, can you?"

"Masterful!" he exclaimed in real astonishment.

"Yes. You tell Big Jean to do this and that and he grumbles and glowers at you — when you're not looking. But he never thinks of contradicting you. But I shall rebel some day and then —"

"Be sorry for it," he said.

"Not one wee little bit, sir!" she said, flushing.

"Going to take your walk to-day?"

"Yes. Oh, I forgot to tell you. Button and I discovered tracks over on the ridge yesterday."

"Moose, deer, or hen?"

"A man's, of course."

"Fresh?"

She nodded.

"Snowed last night," said March, half to himself. "Guess it would n't do any good."

"Do good? What?"

He looked up. "If you do meet some one — I don't think you will, up here — I would n't say anything about your father . . . being here."

His possible meaning heightened the fresh

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rose in her cheeks. Heretofore, March had in no way intimated that he knew anything about her father's history or his reason for being in camp on Whisper Lake.

She put the sinister thought aside as she said: "Of course no one should come near him but you. It would n't be right to allow it."

"That's it," he said slowly. "When you go up that way again, you had better take Jean's rifle. We need fresh meat."

She understood his solicitude thoroughly. "It's too heavy," she replied, hoping to provoke him to argument, but he said nothing. She waved "good-bye" and turned down the path toward her cabin. "If he would only argue — just once. But he is so positive, and — and — masterful," she reflected.

March watched her for a moment. "If Jean don't get here with those Mackinaws and snowshoes and flour and tea, I can see trouble ahead. I could feel half decent again if I had a pipeful of tobacco," he soliloquized.

"I'm hungry, Steve," came from the shadowy corner of the cabin where Hope lay.

"Good!" replied March. "Here, too! I'll get breakfast in two dips and a shake."

An hour later, Arlis was walking briskly along

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the natural level that wormed through the woods toward the ridge, a half-mile back of the camps. Button trotted ahead, regaling himself with frequent dashing explorations to right or left as the thin snow hinted of game. Big Jean's rifle, a ponderous 45-90, which she carried more in the hope of seeing a deer than because Stephen March had suggested that she take it, grew heavier as she went along, and she shifted from right hand to left. "It's a bother," she exclaimed finally. "I know I shan't see any deer." Ahead lay a vista of level white beneath arching green—and at its end the thinly timbered ridge.

She swung along blithely, enjoying the quiet, the freedom, and the brisk, clean air. At a turn she came upon a hollow massed with fallen trees and dead brush. She skirted the conglomeration of timbers, following the open stretches, intent on nothing.

Button, lagging behind to investigate a mysterious hollow beneath the arching roots of a birch, startled her as he came scampering behind her. "I *might* jump a deer," she thought, on the alert again. She threw down the lever of the Winchester, and drawing it up again watched the dull glint of the long shell as it slid into the chamber of the rifle. "We do need meat."

Finally she stopped beside a tree and leaned the

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rifle against it. The thought of killing a harmless animal, even for necessary food, was, for the first time, repugnant to her. She had shot deer when with DuBois, near her father's lumber-camp in Free River Valley. Then she had enjoyed the hunt and the triumph of bringing down a buck, but now . . . since her father had fled from the valley ; since Richard Baird had been drowned . . . to kill . . . anything . . . was a crime. "Oh, Dick," she murmured. "I know you cared . . . so much." That she had been fond of her cousin, as a companion and friend, although she could not care for him the way she knew he wished her to, brought a dimness to her eyes, that she brushed away as she went on more slowly.

Around her was the naked desolation of the maples and beeches of the ridge. Button, knowing that this was the usual limit to their walk, made the most of his morning's freedom by circling slowly round the ridge, busy with the untold, imaginary possibilities just beyond his tentative boundary. Unnoticed, he wandered away, presently to rush toward her, his small body animated with the delight of a discovery. He teased at her skirt, begging her to follow him. "No, Button, we've come far enough." Button did not think so. Impressed by his insist-

ent teasing she motioned to him, and he bounded away as she followed a step or two, peering through the firs on the eastern side of the ridge. Her glance, wandering from clump to clump, suddenly became fixed. Something moved in the firs. A quick chill ran over her as she discerned a lean, red face framed by the clustering green. Her thought flashed back to the rifle left standing against a tree. She endeavored to reason with herself, but the startling fixity of the strange face quickened her fluttering pulses to the swift beat of fear. "Hello!" she called, unable to restrain an impulse to speak. "Who are you?"

The low branches of the firs closed together as the face drew back and disappeared. She took a step backward, half-turning. Then came a faint rustling, the branches parted, and the stooping figure of the gum-picker came toward her. He made quaint, awkward gestures, meant to reassure.

Button ran forward and whined in a friendly way as the man approached.

"It's me," said Peters, standing a little way from her. "I were jest as scared as you be."

"I'm not frightened," she replied. "But what do you want?"

"I seen you afore — cver on thet lake."

"Yes."

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Peters nodded. "I thunk I seen you — like angels, and *him* and a man."

She hesitated between a desire to smile and a returning fear at his peculiar manner.

"Thet leetle dog, he ain't scared of me, be you, puppy?" said Peters, with a happy expression lighting his face as Button wagged his tail.

"Of course not. Is your camp up here?"

He nodded again. "Me and my pardner," he said, peering behind him. "He says I don't dast to come over here, but I come. Nobody been scoldin' *you*, has they?"

"Scolding me? No."

"Looks like you been cryin'. Looie, he's always scoldin' me, an' I ain't done nuthin'. It's goin' to snow," he continued, with apparent irrelevance. "It gits bitin' cold in these here woods in winter. Ain't you cold?"

She shook her head, endeavoring to understand his vagaries of speech.

Peters fumbled in the pocket of his Mackinaw and drew out the pair of moosehide moccasins he had purchased at the settlement.

"Them's fer you," he said. "Looie got mad 'cause I got 'em."

"Oh, no!" she said, drawing back as he proffered the moccasins. "Thank you — but I could n't take them."

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The gum-picker glanced at the moccasins, turning them over in his hands. "When the snow comes, deep, and cold, these here keeps your feet warm. Looie got mad 'cause I got 'em," he reiterated. "But he don't know *why* I got 'em. That's makin' him mad."

"But I don't even know who you are. You see, I could n't accept a gift from you."

Disappointment showed in the added droop to the gum-picker's shoulders. Then his face brightened. "Mebby you'd be likin' suthin' else?"

"No. It's very nice of you. But why should you give me anything? I don't know you and I'm sure you don't know who I am."

"Is he dyin'?" asked Peters, jerking his head toward the lake.

"No. He's getting better," she replied gravely. "How did you know —?"

"I *seen* him," exclaimed the gum-picker. "You're his gal. That's why I brung them," he added, laying the moccasins at her feet. "Them's yourn. They ain't big enough fer me, so you got to take 'em. I been comin' most every day, waitin' to give 'em to you."

The man's earnestness touched her, albeit she was perplexed beyond reason by his erratic insistence. Anxious to return to the camp, and

unwilling to show a haste that might be interpreted as fear, she decided to accept his gift.

"Thank you," she said, taking up the moccasins. "I'll take them. Won't you come down to our camp?"

Despite March's warning, she reasoned that no harm could come of this man's visit, and she wanted March to see him and question him. But Peters shrank back and a hunted look gleamed in his narrow eyes.

"I dassent. *He's* down there."

"Who?"

"John Hope what killed a man," said Peters in a sing-song voice. "Looie says he killed me, but I ain't dead and there's suthin' wrong goin' on. I told Looie thet jedgments comes on folks what is doin' wrong."

"Who are you?" she cried, her hand going out in a swift gesture as if to thrust his words from her. "Who are you?"

Peters, growing excited, lifted his long arms above his head. "I'm a jedgment!" he said solemnly. "Suthin' inside says I be. And suthin' way off keeps comin' closter and closter, tryin' to talk to me, an' it can't. But some day — some day when Looie ain't around, it'll say —"

The swish of footsteps startled Arlis from tense listening to the gum-picker, who dropped his

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arms as Britt hastened toward them between the trees.

"Hey you!" he shouted. "Come 'ere!"

Peters obeyed tremblingly. Then Britt approached the girl and, twitching his thumb toward the gum-picker, said: "He's crazy, Miss. Don't take no stock in anything he says. But he ain't never *hurtin'* nobody. I'm a-takin' care of him."

Something in the face and figure of the stranger seemed familiar. She was almost positive that she had seen the man at her father's camp in Free River Valley. About to question him, she hesitated, and called Button to her. She saw the two men turn and watched them circling away through the forest. Heavy of heart she turned and retraced her steps toward Whisper Lake.

CHAPTER XXI

JEAN'S RETURN

MOVING from the dun twilight of the forest to the harsh noon of the open lake, sluggishly pounding along the bleak shore, Arlis paused, looking out over the gray waste of waters, in all their sombre, unbroken cheerlessness a reflection of her present mood. Her meeting with the gum-picker and his companion and the former's startling reference to her father frightened and perplexed her. She felt that she ought to tell March of the strange men, yet she shrank from the thought of his knowing all that lay behind her father's isolation. She would wait until Jean DuBois returned. She would talk with him. "John Hope what killed a man" drummed in her ears and weighed her heart with hopelessness. Still thinking of the Frenchman, she glanced down-shore and her face brightened as she hurried toward the cabins. A hundred yards out in the lake a canoe rocked in the wash of the waves, and the figure of DuBois swung to the stroke of a paddle that drove the craft from crest to crest. The big Frenchman was singing.

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"Bo' jou', Mees Arlees!" he called as he saw her.

"Oh, Jean, I'm glad! I'm glad!" she cried as the canoe grounded in the slush and shingle of the shore. "And what a load!"

"Oui. Four hun'ed pound, Ah t'ink." He stooped and swung a heavy pack to his shoulder. "Your père, he ees get bettaire?"

"Yes. There's Mr. March in the doorway now."

DuBois nodded as March waved a welcoming hand.

"Put the things in this corner," said Arlis, as she opened the door of her cabin. "Button sleeps in that corner."

Big Jean, straightening up to go for another pack, saw the moccasins Slink Peters had given her.

"W'ere you get dose?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, that's a secret," she replied, laughing in the joy of his arrival. "I'll tell you after supper, to-night."

Back and forth plodded DuBois from cabin to canoe until the boat was empty. As he turned it over and examined its scored and scarred bottom, he shook his head. "Too mooch beeg load. Dat canoe she mos' h'all f'eenesh, Ah t'ink."

"And you brought that tremendous load

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through the Seven Gates, Jean. But are n't you hungry?"

"Ah'm h'always hongree," he replied, grinning.

"We're out of meat, but I'll make some biscuit right away."

"No haf' meat? Den Ah take dat gun and keel wan deer qweek. Beeg Jean he know w'ere to fin' heem."

"But wait. I'll get something ready —"

"Non. Ah go." And the Frenchman, reaching for the rifle that stood near the doorway, turned toward the forest. "You fin' de tabac' een dat leet' pack — for Mo'sieur Marrch. He wan' smoke, mabbe."

And DuBois, plodding down-shore, disappeared in the woodside.

That evening, as Arlis busied herself getting supper, DuBois sat watching her, his dark head tilted back against the cabin wall and his legs crossed Indian-wise. Around him lay the packs, some opened, others corded and bulging with the many things he had purchased at Free River Settlement. Arlis, forgetting her afternoon's experience in the arrival of Jean, looked forward to the opening of the packs with childish delight. In that appalling canoe-load of supplies, she

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thought, were a few personal things, the lack of which she had made a joke of openly, but now anticipated with heartfelt relief and happiness.

Button investigated the worn canvas of the bundles, suspicion in each sniff. He seemed unsatisfied, especially as he nosed the largest pack in which were the provisions. Presently the more definite promise of cooking finally drew him to Arlis, whom he followed from stove to table and back again with busy interest in the completion of her task.

"Ah take does t'ing," said DuBois, getting up and carrying the food she had prepared, for March and her father, to the other cabin. While he was gone she arranged the plates, knives and forks, the cups, the steaming hot biscuit and fried meat on the rough table and stepped to the door. Big Jean, standing back from the other camp, was talking with March, who stood on the doorstep. Something in the attitude of the latter, a suggestion of weariness, a tinge of pallor in the strong face, touched Arlis, and she hesitated in the act of calling Jean to supper. Again the form of the gum-picker, with his lean, wild face, seemed to be before her. "John Hope wha^t killed a man." She drew away from the doorway and stood looking at the naked brown walls of the cabin with its meagre and crude furnishings.

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Slowly she went to the table, dropped to the low bench beside it, and hid her face in her arms. Richard Baird, the Indian Toomey, Little Jules—all swept away in a brief second of horror and helplessness. Then the leprous blight that had stricken her father, and had turned Big Jean shuddering from his threshold—that invisible menace that still hung, a midnight shadow, round the every movement of Stephen March. And somewhere in the Free River Valley, the undiscovered bones of the gum-picker . . .

Her own sorrow and loneliness she put aside in unselfish love and pity for her father. Lifting her young face, stained with the slow tears of her grief, she prayed that he might be forgiven and live. The whisper of a moccasined foot on the threshold and Button pattered across the floor, as Big Jean, rigid against the dull light of the western sky, stood in the doorway.

"Ah help," he said. "Don' you mak to cry, ma petite. Ah help."

"Oh, Jean, if you could. But we can't stay here. We must go home some day," she said, lifting her head.

"You go sometaime. Den Ah stay an' ta' care of your père, jus' same."

"I can't, Jean. I can't leave him alone up here."

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"Dat mans your père mak' vite weet, he bad mans. He should be keel."

"No! No! You must not say that."

"He mak' to keel your père, Ah t'ink."

"Yes. But father should n't have gone away. We've got to go back and face it. They'll believe dad when he tells them."

"Ah don' know dat," said DuBois, shaking his head. "Dat Louis Breet he say to de mans he see your père keel dat Sleenk Petaire."

"Louis Britt?"

"Oui. Dat hees name; Louis."

She motioned toward the table, and the Frenchman, his great bulk casting a gigantic shadow on the walls and roof of the tiny cabin, sat opposite her. Saying little he ate with the unstinted appetite of the hardy woodsman. To him a meal was a matter of serious business — a mechanical stoking of fuel energy in which quantity, as opposed to quality, was the essential. Arlis fed Button, who became actively anxious, his instinct seeming to warn him that his share of the meal must be disposed of promptly, to offset the possibilities of his Gargantuan competitor's appetite.

As the girl broke a biscuit and offered it to the little dog, she questioned Jean again, asking him for a description of Britt, and also, after some hesitation, of the gum-picker.

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"They did n't find any trace of Slink Peters's body after the fire?" she said, when he had described the two men.

"Non. Dat wan fonny t'ing Ah don' un'-stan'."

After supper the Frenchman filled his pipe and sat smoking while she washed the few dishes. When she had finished he arose and untied one of the packs.

"Dees t'ing Ah get for you," he said, pulling out a Mackinaw, resplendent in its garish plaid in which red predominated. With childish delight he rummaged in the pack. Out came a dark-blue and really effective toque of heavy wool, two pair of high-topped shoe-pacs, a packet of buttons, thread, and several yards of coarse, unbleached cotton cloth.

"Dat ees h'all, Ah t'ink," he said, pretending that the pack was empty, and looking up at Arlis with a twinkle in his eyes which his assumed gravity of feature really intensified.

"Thank you, Jean."

The broad plaids of the Mackinaw blurred in the firelight as its colors danced before her eyes.

"By Gar! Ah h'almos' forget!" he exploded, plunging his arm shoulder-deep into the pack. Mysteriously he drew out a bundle that unrolled as he raised his arm and from his uplifted hand

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dangled four brilliant red woolen stockings. "Hah!" And he laughed, swinging the stockings back and forth, gazing at them critically with head tilted sideways. "Ba'tiste, hees femme, she mak' dose. Ah mak' to buy dem, an' she say, 'Non.' Den Ah say Ah goin' get marrie —"

"Jean DuBois, you wretch!" cried Arlis, laughing in spite of herself.

"Den she say it gran' dat some fille she mak' me to min' laik' Ba'tiste. Ah say to Ba'tiste, hees femme, 'Mabbe Ah no same laik' Ba'tiste.' Den she laugh — an' Ah buy dose."

Anxious to prolong his enjoyment, DuBois puffed solemnly at his pipe, as Arlis gathered up the things. When she sat down again he was gazing absorbedly in a little wood-framed mirror, his final surprise for her.

"Ah t'ink Ah 'm gettin' to be a h'ole man," he said, seemingly intent on his reflection in the glass.

She came and peeped over his shoulder.

DuBois, holding the glass at arm's length, grinned hugely. "Ah buy dees to look for see w'at ole fool Jean DuBois he goin' be sometaime. Hein?"

"I don't think you're growing old. I think you're even better-looking than Mr. March."

"You t'ink dat?" he exclaimed, unable, in his native simplicity, to control the proud satis-

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faction in his smile. "Den mabbe you t'ink dat Mo'sieur Marrech he vaire' w'at you call han'some mans?"

"Well — he is fine-looking. But, Jean, I want to tell you about the moccasins, and the men I saw to-day."

"W'at mans?"

With repressed exclamations shaping his lips to utterance from time to time, he listened to her story of the morning walk and its climax. When she had finished he tucked his pipe in his pocket and arose.

"Ah goin' for mak' dat oдаire cabane dees week — an' den Ah go h'out for breeng dose t'ing to h'eat," he said motioning toward the packs against the wall. "W'en Ah come i'again, Ah look for dose mans, by Gar! Ah t'ink dat Sleenk Petaire he no keel, an' dat Louis Breet. Hah!"

"Oh, Jean, do you think the man was n't killed?"

"Ah don' know. Ah fin' h'out w'en Ah come back."

She followed him to the door and as she said "good-night" he gave her the looking-glass. With a sweep of his arm and a bow not lacking a certain rugged grace, he proffered his gift. "W'en you look in dat, you see w'at make Jean DuBois de happies' mans een dees forêt."

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"Oh!" For a second she misunderstood him. But he disclaimed the implied suggestion in her tone with a quick gesture.

"Non! Laik' dat!" And he pointed to the faint gleam of a star that shone through the cloud-rack of the winter sky.

A pace away he turned and said, laughing, "Eef w'at you see een dat glass stay dere h'al-ways, Ah t'ink Mo'sieur Marrech wan' look een dat glass h'all taimé, mabbe."

CHAPTER XXII

THE "LOUP-GAROU"

THE polished black of seared spruce logs and the duller black of charred cedar splits struck sharply against the blank white of the drifted snow where John Hope's cabin had stood. Near the little camp down-shore, Big Jean and March had built another log shelter in which the old lumberman found the comfort of a clean, fresh browse bed, new blankets, and above all the frequent presence of Arlis. The old camp, and everything that had to do with it, had been burned. DuBois had made a second trip to the settlement, returning with a canoe-load of provisions and clothing, which, he reluctantly admitted, would be the last load of supplies brought down the river. If they ran short of provisions before spring, he would have to go out and return on snowshoes, bringing in what he could pack on his back.

March naturally welcomed the change to the new cabin with a large sense of relief. Notwithstanding his equable temper and rugged strength, the vicious ordeal of attending the sick man had

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worn his resolution almost to the point of breaking.

The scarred and pitted wreck of his former self, John Hope sat day by day, silently watching Arlis as she talked with March or teased Button to a fine pretense of offended dignity. In the indifference of convalescence the old man at first contented himself with the impassive joy of merely existing. As he grew stronger he entered more and more into the drift of the conversation round the evening fire until March and he became friendly. At last, Hope, feeling a sense of security in the whole-heartedness of his companion, all but made up his mind to tell March frankly all that there was to tell. In this he was interrupted by Big Jean, who, in the narrow confines of daily routine, became as restless as the proverbial "loup-garou" and proposed that he make a third venture, on snowshoes, to the settlement. He prophesied a heavy winter, and argued that the supplies, even augmented by an occasional deer or moose, might not last till spring. The fact that Arlis had written a letter to Brent Townsend, asking him to write and urge her father to return and face the possibilities of a trial, had more to do with the Frenchman's anxiety to get to the settlement than the possibility of a shortage of provisions. Hope endeavored to dissuade DuBois

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from attempting the journey in the uncertainty of the winter weather, but the Frenchman only laughed. He felt an unconquerable security in his own hardihood, a security which eventually all but cost him his life. One sunless morning Hope awoke to find him gone.

With his cap pulled down until its oval of beaver fur framed his face from jaw to forehead, and the wide collar of his blanket coat buckled across his chin, DuBois, crossing the undrifted expanse of Whisper Lake, paused and looked back at the skein of smoke drifting above the distant cabins. About him the winter forest of the western shore towered in a hushed majesty of snow-sprinkled branches. Beyond, toward the south, and palpitating with the dull, reflected morning light, lay the white eternity of the muskeg, barren, bleak, and unmarked by tree or trail. The big Frenchman turned, glanced up at the gray sea of unbroken clouds, shrugged his shoulders, and struck out across the barren with the easy, tireless stride of the seasoned woodsman. Behind him the ragged ovals of his snowshoe tracks lengthened to a winding trail as he skirted the shallow depressions which marked snow-hidden pools and ponds. Although his trail, in short stretches, seemed erratically chosen, as it lengthened in the slow miles its general direction was

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toward the west. Contrary to the usual dogged monotony of crossing the barrens, he felt a keen elation in their limitless wastes. So sure of his endurance that he had never questioned it, and so certain was he of his ability to reach the little settlement in Free River Valley, over the unmarked white nothingness of the muskegs, that the ever-present chance of becoming lost was a hazard unweighed by him.

In the past year, owing to his somewhat mysterious comings and goings, he had earned from the Free River habitants the title of the "Loup-garou," a *nom-de-guerre* which he openly frowned at but cherished secretly as a kind of romantic distinction. True to his type, despite his long association with the practical John Hope and his daughter, he was superstitious in the extreme, which was apparent as he stooped to re-lace a racquette thong. "Dat Lou'-garou, she vair' bad signe. Ah know dat. But eef Jean DuBois ees call dat Lou'-garou, den he h'all right, but he vair' bad signe for dose mans dat make to look at heem." He chuckled, but notwithstanding his assurance, finally crossed himself as he arose and resumed his journey. Frequently he swung his arms and beat his mittened hands against his chest as the quiet cold crept in subtly and nipped his fingers. At noon he drew some bread and meat

from the pack and ate it while plodding along. Mid-afternoon and the distant edge of the western forest loomed in a foot-high streak of wavering black,—in reality the divide or height-of-land, a high range of hills between the muskeg and Free River Valley. A day's journey beyond the ridge and he would be at the settlement. He swung on with a lengthened stride. He would make his night camp in the shelter of the timbers edging the barren. His snowshoes ticked off the hours with the regularity of a pendulum. His breath, freezing on the upturned collar of his blanket coat, edged it with fine white frost. Away and away behind him a rising northeast wind whispered in the distant miles, and tiny snow-clouds flirted from each lift of his racquettes. Imperceptibly the massed level of the clouds stirred and seemed to draw nearer the earth, and widely separated flakes of snow sifted slanting to the barren. The wind awoke with a sibilant rush across the low hummocks, and brushed long swirling fans of scudding snow-dust from their tops,—fans that spread and eddying twisted to impalpable ropes of mist. Slowly the settling flakes gathered in the creases of the woodsman's coat and lay a velvet sheet on the top of his pack, obliterating the straps and buckles. "Hola!" shouted DuBois. "Le tempête du Nord!" And

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his arm went up in a wild gesture of energetic appreciation. Resistance of any kind always tuned his slow energies to a massed efficiency that he felt was resistless. Ahead of him and slanting across his trail the loose snow tumbled and spun in fanciful cloud-shapes through which he saw at intervals the dim line of the forest like the far shore of a storm-lashed sea. As he drew nearer to the timber the naked branches of solitary alder clumps stuck through the moving snow, stiff and brittle, and whipping in the wind. Then came clumps of stunted cedar, and presently he was within the shelter of the darkening woodside. In the last light of the winter afternoon he scraped the snow from beneath the low, arching fans of a cedar, unslung his pack and axe, and cast about for firewood. With the light axe poised for a stroke, he stiffened, a huge, snow-powdered statue. The keen blade of the little axe gleamed above his head. A few paces away a gaunt gray shape slunk beneath a snow-sweeping bough. He waited to see it reappear. An instant's hesitation and he flung the axe. It whirled through the feathery branches and thudded against the bole of a tree. Then in the silence of expectation he strode forward and peered beneath the tented green. "Ah t'ink Ah see somet'ing dat Ah don' see." He recovered his axe and moved cautiously

round the circling limbs. At his feet were the tracks of a wolf. He glanced at the axe and slowly picked a twist of silver-gray hair from its edge. The wolf had vanished. "Dat de firs' lou' Ah see for longtaime," he muttered. "He come close—Ah don' know. Mabbe he dat Lou'-garou. Mabbe..." He went to the farther side of the tree examining the tracks where the wolf had slunk away. He stooped over them in the dusk, breathing heavily as he gazed at the unmistakable trail. He knew that there had been no wolves in the Free River country for years, and he, being so thoroughly qualified to know, was startled and puzzled. The beast itself meant nothing to him. But the fact that he had seen a wolf so recently after his soliloquy on the "Loup-garou" or werewolf of the habitants, seemed mysteriously awesome and suggestive. "Dat vair' bad signe," he reflected as he rolled in his blankets that night. The wilderness of snow-swathed barren, the storm, the heavy miles of winter forest still to traverse, the return journey with the great pack of supplies, were as straws that he would brush aside with scarce a thought of personal risk, but the gray wolf . . . that had awakened all the dread superstition in his soul, shaking his physical poise to an extent that accounted for, rather than, as he believed, anticipated the accident which followed.

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Next day at noon he had crossed the height-of-land and was working down the steep hillside in a long, easy slant, passing between the mast-high trees like some Lilliputian adventurer in a voiceless world of frozen enchantment, when a figure passed between him and the distant level where his cabin stood. He paused and watched the figure as it stooped. He saw the dull glimmer of fur. "Some mans he mak' to trap on ma ligne," he thought. "Hola! Who dat?"

Baptiste of Free River Settlement straightened up and looked toward the hillside. Then he waved his arm. "Bo' jou'! Bo' jou'!" he called, recognizing in its muffled bulk the figure of his friend Big Jean. Dropping the marten which he had just taken from his trap, he plodded up the hill toward DuBois, who came to meet him.

"Ah know you don' mak' de trap on dees ligne an' Ah mak' de trap w'ile you at dat Whis-paire Lac."

So said Baptiste.

DuBois nodded. "D'as h'all right, Ba'tiste. You haf' tabac?"

Baptiste gave DuBois his tobacco-pouch and the latter filled his pipe and smoked. "Ah see wan iou' w'en Ah come by dat muskeg," he said, gazing through the trees toward his cabin.

Baptiste exclaimed in surprise. He had not

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seen a wolf since he was a boy. They chattered awhile and finally DuBois, after telling his companion that he was welcome to the spare traps in his own cabin, passed on down the hillside.

"Ah see you at Free Rivaire?" he said, turning.

"Oui." And Baptiste hastened to finish the round of the traps.

An hour later, as he passed near the cabin in the pines, he stopped suddenly. "Dat wan fonny t'ing. Ah don' seed at smoke. Ah t'ink Ah mak' to see eef Jean he een dat cabane."

He dumped the load of fur from his shoulders and strode toward the camp. As he passed the chopping-log from which DuBois had scraped the snow with his snowshoe, he saw a bright blotch of red and from it smaller spots that led to the open doorway. The light axe lay in the snow.

"Hei!" he exclaimed. "You een dere, Jean?" And he peered through the dusk of the interior.

A groan and he had unlaced his racquettes and stepped quickly to the figure that half lay in the bunk, gripping a naked and spouting ankle. He whipped a shirt from a peg on the wall and tore it in strips. With quick fingers he wound a bandage above the cut and, pushing Big Jean's hand away, drew it together as best he could and bound

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it with the cloth. Then he kindled a fire and melted some snow. With the water he washed the cut, re-binding it carefully.

"A-h-h!" The big Frenchman raised himself on his arm. "Ah know dat somet'ing vair' bad goin' come w'en Ah see dat lou'. Dat leet' axe she slip w'en Ah mak' to chop de wood. 'Ow you come back to dees cabane?"

"Ah don' see dat smoke. Den Ah look for you."

"You good fren'," said DuBois. "W'at Ah'm goin' do?"

"Ah mak' to get you somet'ing to h'eat. Den Ah go for get Hilaire. You com' h'an stay veet moi, mabbe."

Although Baptiste had offered no comment, had evinced no sympathy, DuBois knew him to be a man whose silences were more eloquent of true friendship than all the uttered solicitude of a score of his other Free River companions. The big Frenchman, used to the sight of accidents such as his in the winter camps, knew that he had injured himself to an extent that would require prompt and skilled attention. "Dat Lou'-garou," he muttered continuously, when Baptiste had departed for the settlement. "An' ma petite Arlees. She wondaire w'y Beeg Jean he don' come back laik' he say."

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He had told Baptiste to send word to Brent Townsend that he would be at the settlement next day. Townsend would get the doctor from Burnt Creek City. Ordinarily he would have cursed at the accident which kept him from returning to Whisper Lake, but the shock of the injury and the superstition accompanying it bound him to a silent awe. He drew the heavy blankets over his shoulders and glanced at the fire. He knew it would not last until his friends returned. A film of pain blurred his eyes and beside the fire he seemed to see Arlis, kneeling as she warmed her hands before it. "Ah come back qveek w'en dees foot she go h'again," he murmured drowsily, and the sound of a voice, created in his own imagination, but nevertheless distinct as though from the girl's own lips came to him. "Of course you will, Jean. And I'm so sorry that you have hurt yourself."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HUNT

THREE weeks had passed since the Frenchman left for the settlement. March, having stacked the cabin walls high with firewood, made several unsuccessful hunts for deer. Finally, alarmed at Jean's prolonged absence, he had difficulty in persuading himself not to journey toward the settlement in search for him. He feared that the Frenchman had been lost or injured;—otherwise he would have been back in a few days at most. Then again, the thought of leaving the old lumberman and his daughter alone, should anything happen to March himself, stayed him from venturing farther than a day's journey from camp. He contented himself with exploring the eastern shore of the lake, and, governed by the weather, with making short trips inland in search for game. He knew that the deep snow would cause the deer to "yard," and he explored many small tracts of cedar growth, but without success. Then came a heavy fall of snow that held him storm-bound in the cabin for a week, where he spent the time teaching Arlis the intri-

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cacies of snowshoe weaving, meanwhile chatting with the old lumberman, and frequently, much to Button's disgust, grunting like a bull-moose to frighten the little dog. Button's antics amused Arlis and she laughed. To hear her laugh, March was willing to play "moose" indefinitely. When the storm eased, he again set out, determined to find where the deer were "yarding." On this occasion he was fortunate. Several miles from camp he discovered a deer-yard, and from it blazed a trail to the lake, arriving home late one afternoon, glowing from the vigorous exercise and enthusiastic over his discovery, which assured fresh meat whenever they were in need of it.

Arlis, who frequently accompanied him on his shorter trips, made him promise to take her to the "yard." One morning, after a January thaw and a succeeding three days of sharp weather, they set out, walking briskly over the dazzling snow-crust. They took their snowshoes, he explaining that it was in reality less tiring to walk on the slippery glaze with snowshoes than without them.

Through the cold, stiff nakedness of the frozen forest they went, he plodding silently along, she following. Her brown eyes were bright and her cheeks rosy with the sting of the keen winter air. As they came to the ridge where she had met the

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gum-picker, he paused to line the blazes leading to the deer-yard. Arlis came up the slope laughing in sheer physical buoyancy, the tassel of her blue toque bobbing jauntily. She met the frank admiration in his eyes with a heightened color and a quick droop of her lids. Jean's "looking-glass speech," as she called it, flashed through her mind, but in the swift pulse of her enjoyment she set it aside lightly.

"Got your breath?" he asked, smiling.

She nodded and he turned and swung down the easy slope and out into the more open reaches below, where she walked beside him, lightly amused at the rhythmic "click" of their snow-shoes as they gritted over the glittering crust. The cold clean air sent the warm blood rioting through her veins and presently she pushed back the toque from her forehead on which glistened tiny beads of sweat.

"My thong's coming loose," she said, unwilling to admit that his natural stride was a race for her.

He stooped and examined the rawhide lacing, an amused twinkle in his eyes as he asked: "Which one?"

"The left — I think."

Then he laughed outright, and she joined in his merriment at her indecision.

"Horrid, are n't they?" she said, referring to the edge of vivid stocking above her moccasin-tops.

"They were mighty cold, and white, and little when I saw them last," he replied gravely. "You had on gray socks then—mine."

"Stephen March! I meant my red stockings, and you know it."

"Have n't we known each other long enough to drop the 'March'?" he asked, lacing up the thong with exaggerated care.

"No. We're going to keep it up. The exercise is good for us."

"I'll set a slower pace, then."

And he slipped on his mittens and arose.

"Would you really like it if I called you just 'Stephen'?"

He accepted the challenge quickly. "Yes. And I would n't object if you said 'Steve' once in a while, although I know you don't like it."

"No, I don't," she said decisively. "Now I do like 'Stephen'—"

"I'm glad to know that," he said, smiling.

The girl was silent. She knew that her silence would eventually bring him to speak again, and she rather enjoyed teasing him into the intensity of utterance that followed, although she feared it a little.

THE HUNT

"I'm glad to know that," he repeated. "I did n't think you thought very much of me."

"Oh, but I do," she said, laughing lightly.

Her frankness brought a frown to his earnest face. "If she did care for me," he reflected, "she would n't speak like that."

The girl, trudging beside him as they resumed their journey, touched his arm. "What are you thinking about, Stephen?"

"You," he answered, without turning to look at her.

There was a grimness in his tone and bearing, as he spoke, that she could not understand. The pleasant raillery had been interrupted by his seriousness. Swiftly she compared his direct, unbending manner with the easy repartee that had been her cousin's. Saddened by the thought of Richard Baird, she, too, became silent. March seemed to be lost in a world of his own until, crossing a low ridge of snow-covered bushes, she caught her racquette in a branch and stumbled. In a flash he caught her arm.

"Thank you," she said gently, looking sideways at his unsmiling face. "I do enjoy being out on this hunt and is n't it just life to breathe this air, — and get away from Whisper Lake?" she added quickly. "Are you going slower because you think I am tired?"

"No. I was thinking of something else. There's the 'yard' over there, where the land dips toward those cedars."

"Shall I wait here?"

"No. The wind's right. We can get a little closer. When we come to that clump of firs you can wait."

In the shelter of the firs, a few hundred yards from the deer-yard, he left her, first drawing the rifle from its covering. Then, twisting out of his snowshoe thongs, he left the racquettes sticking upright in the crust, a short distance from where she stood.

The midday sun, reflected in a million needle-points of blinding light, blurred by its very intensity the delicate filigree of shadowed fir branches on the barren snow-crust. Arlis, shaping her hand above her eyes, turned to gaze wonderingly at the far splendor of undulating white, dotted with infrequent clumps of restful green. Here and there a mammoth pine shot skyward, its black, solitary shaft crowned with a fantasy of iridescent blue and silver. A little wind whipped the slender fir tops round her, and a tiny drift of snow-dust spun rustling across the glaze at her feet. She drew her hand from its leather mitten and settled the toque more snugly about her ears.

THE HUNT

In the chill of inaction the keen, low wind bit through the heavy blanket coat and she slipped from her snowshoe thongs and paced briskly back and forth in the green-walled arena of the firs, breathing deeply of the crisp winter air that flushed her cheeks like wine.

CHAPTER XXIV

SUN-PATCH AND SHADOW

STEPHEN MARCH, moving cautiously toward the frozen screen of cedars, saw no glimmer of reddish-brown, no movement of lifting head, no quick stamp of slender, sharp-edged hoofs. The "yard" was empty. Across the trodden snow, packed by innumerable restless pacings of the deer, lay the bright glare of the sun, shot through with the black shadows of the patches of clustered cedars — green islands in a frozen sea of white. "Strange," he reflected. "They couldn't have heard us or winded us." Cautiously he pushed the crackling branches aside and advanced. Filled with the expectancy of seeing life and motion, if only for the second before he lifted the rifle to fire, the absolute silence of the place by contrast stirred in him a sense of desolation, as though he had come upon a camp abandoned unexpectedly. The cold sunlight and the sharp-edged shadows grew fantastic in the over-glare of the sky. He shrugged his shoulders, standing irresolute. A movement in a space to the left caught his eye.

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Instinctively he raised his rifle, to lower it immediately and step forward to the open. "Hello!" he called, shifting the Winchester from his right to his left hand and quickening his stride. "Hello! Hold on!"

Slink Peters, making the round of his traps, had seen the approaching figures far out on the barren. Curiosity had urged him to creep to the edge of the deer-yard, and timidity had caused him to intrench himself in the cedars as March approached. As the unknown man drew nearer, Peters turned to run. The terse command and the other's nearness checked him.

"What's your hurry?" said March, eyeing the lean, muffled figure with suspicion.

"Don't you tetch me!" And the gum-picker shrunk back a step. "I'm a jedgment!"

"Judgment? Yes, I t. nk you are. You've jumped all the deer in this yard. Who are you, anyway?"

Peters, fumbling with the lock of his rifle, backed away.

"Hold on!" And March pointed to the gum-picker's hand. "Just ease down that hammer. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I ain't done nuthin'," said Slink, still holding the rifle at his hip. "I ain't hurtin' nobody."

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"That 's all right," said March, drawing a step nearer.

"I seen you afore," said the other. "Over there on Whisper Lake. You and *him*."

"Him? Who are you talking about?"

"John Hope what killed a man," said Peters. "I know. He 's over there, sick."

March, endeavoring to recall where and when he had last seen that lean, half-witted face, asked suddenly: "Who did he kill?"

"Me," replied Peters, somewhat proudly.

"Slink Peters!" said March, watching the gum-picker's eyes.

"Uhuh." And Peters nodded.

"Well, John Hope is n't sick now. He 's getting well. And you 're alive, and you 'd better come along with me and let the old man know it. That will build him up quicker than medicine."

"I dassent," said Slink. "Looie 'd kill me. Strike me dead, he would."

"I 'll see that he does n't," said March reassuringly. "Come on, Slink. I 'm not going to hurt you and no one else will. That 's good enough, is n't it?" And he slipped off his mitten and offered to shake hands.

"Look out!" said Peters, crouching. "You 're tryin' to ketch me. I 'm a jedgment, I am."

Mistaking the gum-picker's real terror for

SUN-PATCH AND SHADOW

timidity, March gestured toward the rifle. "Put the gun down, Slink, and shake. I only want to do the right thing —"

With a ripping crash the rifle in Peters's hands exploded and March staggered back at the shock of the bullet as it ploughed through the great muscles of his shoulder.

"You damned fool!" he cried, clutching at his wounded shoulder as Peters crashed through the brittle branches and was gone. March reached out blindly for the support of the wavering trees. His knees shook and his head drooped, but he pulled himself together and staggered across the trampled snow toward the firs.

Arlis, startled out of her even stride by the crash and grumbling echo of the rifle-shot, stopped and listened. She had not seen the spirt of snow at her feet, but as she resumed her pacing to and fro, she stooped and looked curiously at the little gouge in the crust, ending in a tiny patch of ice particles. She scraped away the snow and dug out the spent bullet, a vicious, soft-nosed .38 that had not mushroomed, but still retained its nickled jacket, creased with the turn of the rifling. "Why, he would n't shoot in this direction!" she said, rolling the bullet over in her hand. "Stephen March would n't do that."

She glanced fearfully toward the edge of the

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

cedars. Presently, coming round a tangle of stunted trees she saw him. Surprised that he did not call or gesture, she attributed the fact to his possible disappointment in missing and failing to get a second shot.

"Did you get him?" she called.

"No. He got me," replied March thickly.

As he drew nearer she saw him lift his bare hand away from his shoulder and the color of his fingers sickened her.

"Stephen! How did it happen?" And she was at his side, steadying him with trembling hands.

"Crazy gum-picker. Ran into him over there. I'm not hit bad."

"Gum-picker?" She drew in her breath and bit her lips. "What can *I* do?"

"A whole lot, if you can stand it. Unbuckle my belt first. Now if you've got a handkerchief or something —"

She unbuckled the belt and quickly unwound the handkerchief from her throat and folded it in a pad.

"That's right. Now I'll unbutton the coat and vest. You can slip the handkerchief in —"

"I can't reach. Sit down, here, against this stub. I'm not going to faint."

He wanted to smile at her grave assurance,

SUN-PATCH AND SHADOW

but the effort only resulted in a tense grin as she drew the stained and soggy shirt back from the wound.

"Oh!" she cried. "It bleeds so fast!"

He took the pad from her hands and shoved it over the wound. "Now get the belt."

She understood, and slipping the belt under his uninjured arm, drew it across the point of his shoulder.

"It does n't quite reach," she said.

"Try it again. Tighter. It does n't hurt."

The girl shut her eyes and drew the belt up to the first hole, pressing the buckle home by the touch of her fingers.

"Good girl. Now we've got to get out of this."

She helped him to his knees, and leaning against the stub he got up, swaying dizzily.

"I'm all right now. Can't bend over. If you'll get the rifle. I dropped it when I was hit."

She returned with the rifle and they moved slowly away from the fire, she walking close to him and watching his face, as with lips drawn in a grim white line he forced himself to a mechanical progress. Ordinarily he would have been puzzled by her lack of surprise when he mentioned the advent of a stranger in the country, but the

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

shock of the wound had dulled his mind to blank indifference. His one idea was to get to camp.

They shuffled along the wide, white miles of the open timberlands, the man laboring painfully, she following. When he paused to rest, she drew close to him, cheering him with brave words which trembled with the pity in her heart.

The sun had dropped behind a sullen cloud-bank before they topped the ridge back of the camp. Going down the dusky western slope he paused frequently, leaning against the trees. Once he all but fell, but her outstretched arm and a mighty effort of his will saved him, and he drew himself up to plod on again. In the distance she saw the dull gleam of the cabins.

"Nearly home!" she cried cheerfully, nodding toward the lake.

"Snow's soft here," he said. "We could go easier without the snowshoes."

She knelt and unlaced her own racquettes. As she worked to untie the frozen thongs, he drew his sheath-knife from his pocket.

"Cut them—and sling them on the thongs over your shoulder."

In her haste the knife slipped and a seam of red gleamed on her finger.

SUN-PATCH AND SHADOW

"Your fault, Stephen. You keep that knife so terribly sharp." And she smiled at the dismay in his face. "Why, I left your knife on the snow when I took off your belt!"

"I picked it up when you went for the rifle."

He felt that to keep talking, to keep his interest awake in *anything*, would aid him in fighting off the weariness that drew a haze before his eyes—a haze that thinned and disappeared when he concentrated his will. When he rested, it returned with doubled intensity.

As the girl tucked the knife in his coat-pocket, he glanced down at her bowed head. In stature, when compared with his height and breadth, she seemed little more than a child. A braid of her hair lay across his sleeve. The smooth ripple of the braid, thick and glowing, fascinated him. As in a dream he lifted it to his lips, even as she looked up.

"Stephen," she said lightly. "I did n't know you could — unbend enough to do that."

"I did n't unbend much," he replied, trying to smile. "And I could n't do it again, in five minutes more."

"Why?"

"Because," he answered, turning toward the lake, "I'll be about ready to quit. I'm wound up tight enough to make the cabin — after that

. . . Things are humming in my head . . . but
. . . I'm holding them down."

That night as he lay on the low bunk, his eyes closed and his pallor outlined like white paper against the unbarked logs of the cabin wall, Arlis who had been whispering to her father, stepped quietly across to the still figure and stood looking down at the drawn, white face. All that he had been to her, through brunt of circumstance, from the day he had found her on the island up to this hour, she weighed against all that he wished to be, knowing his heart as she had for many days. Unconsciously his strength, his usual cheerfulness, his very silences had drawn her to him as to one with whom she could share the burden that she had borne so bravely, and alone. Alone because even DuBois, in his wholehearted but rude sympathy, did not seem to understand the depths of her grief. That she trusted Stephen March, she did not question. That she loved him . . .

Softly she smoothed his black hair back from his forehead. Then, like the flutter of a moth's wings, her lips touched his cheek.

When she had said good-night to her father and left for her own cabin, John Hope,

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SOFTLY SHE SMOOTHED HIS BLACK HAIR

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turning toward March, saw that his eyes were open.

"How do you feel?" asked the old lumberman.

"Buzzy in my head. But say, John, if I wasn't dreaming awhile ago, you could n't kill me with an axe now."

CHAPTER XXV

"BECAUSE YOU DID NOT TELL ME . . ."

JOHN HOPE'S eager face, shiny-white in the firelight, was turned toward the bunk on which March lay, gazing listlessly toward the door. For three days and nights Arlis had been almost constantly at March's side, talking with him when the delirium of his fever led him babbling through a labyrinth of former days in Alaska or on the Western plains — days that were fraught with the vivid color of adventure of which, in his rational hours, he had never spoken. Little by little she came to realize the depth and breadth of his nature, tinged with the rough humor of the outdoors, but withal earnest in its quiet intensity, and straightforward rugged simplicity. Her voice, quiet and soothing, seemed to call him back from each desperate conflict with himself to the placid level of everyday affairs. At times he asked her to bring him water or to change the bandages, frequently sleeping and waking again to feel her cool hand on his forehead. His frequent mention of Peters and

BECAUSE YOU DID NOT TELL ME

Louis Britt at first startled and finally interested Hope. Arlis had explained to her father as much of the accident as she could.

Hope, patiently watching the sick man's face, spoke as he saw that the latter's eyes were cleared of their feverish light.

"Arlis has gone to her camp, to rest. Thought you was asleep. I reckon she's some tired. Been settin' up the last three nights. Would n't hear of me 'tendin' you alone."

"Three days?" said March in a weak voice.

"Yep. You been doin' some tall talkin' for three days and nights. Reckon your head's all right now?"

"Head's all right. Where did he get me?" he asked, nodding slightly toward his shoulder.

"Cleared the bone. Tore up the muscle some. Reckon you'll be lame in that shoulder for quite a spell."

"I was watching his hand — and I jumped. But I did n't jump soon enough."

"Well, I take it that it's mighty good for all of us that you did jump. I guess Arlis would have gone clean crazy if he done for you — say nothin' of me."

March shifted uncomfortably.

"Here," said Hope, "I'll fix you. What you want?"

"Pipe."

Hope grinned. "You're comin' along fine. And I'm mighty glad." He hesitated, filling the pipe for March. As he lighted it and sat down, he continued: "I been wantin' to tell you suthin' for a long while. It's been botherin' me. But I guess now I can tell you. You've been more than a friend to us, Steve. Great God! you've been everything to my gal. I ain't thinkin' of myself." He drew the bench closer to the bunk. His hands were crossed between his knees and his head was bowed. As he spoke he gazed at the floor. "When you was out of your head, you kep' talkin' of Slink Peters, the gum-picker—Free River Valley. Did you know him?"

March nodded, and a faint smile wavered on his lips. "Yes, I knew him, or I would n't be here."

Hope raised his head. "How's that?" he asked, gazing at the other with parted lips.

"I know what you're going to say—take this blamed pipe. I can't smoke—You need n't finish."

"You!" said Hope, drawing back. "Well, I might have known it. I did it."

"No, you did n't," said March. "When I think of the way he got me I almost wish you had. He's alive. Up here somewhere with Louis

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Britt, his partner. I had trouble with Peters once before."

Hope, fearing to believe that his companion was quite clear in his mind, lifted one hand: "*If* what you are tellin' me is so, — an' thank God, if it is, — I can go back. Go back . . ." he hesitated, radiant with the thought of freedom; "to work ag'in. To work. Steve, you don't know what it means to a man to be doin' nuthin' but —"

"I think I do," said March. "And I think I know what it will mean to Arlis."

"She's the one I'm thinkin' of. My gal."

"Well, you ought to think of her. I don't want to preach to you. You're older than I. But, John Hope, you ought to have thought of that girl *before* you got scared out of your senses. Laying Peters out is n't the worst thing you've done."

"I know it. I know it. It's been a curse to me — my temper gettin' the best of me —"

"Temper!" interrupted March. "Do you know that if I ever let *my* temper get away from me — and I have come pretty close to it once or twice — the results would make your handling of Slink look like first-grade school work. I *daren't* let my temper loose."

"You say you had trouble with Slink once?"

"Yes," replied March. "I crossed his trail

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over in Buell County once. He was selling rum."

"You?"

"Deputy. Came in here to get you."

"And Slink ain't dead?"

"He was alive enough to drop me—that day," replied March. "I'm sure of that."

Hope, stunned by the tumbling rush of one disclosure after another, sat with bowed head, muttering. "You!" he said, aloud. "You! And you nussed me through that smallpox. An' Arlis never knowed—or me. But what 'll Arlis say to that?"

"I'm mighty glad to know that you're out of your trouble. You know that. But I want to tell you right here and now that what Arlis will say to it means more to me than Slink Peters, alive or dead. Now you understand me."

"I was thinkin'—I was thinkin' . . ." Hope shook his head. "I know what she thinks of you—now. But Arlis is a gal with no give-in to her when she gets set. Knowin' you come here to get me . . . but then, you nussed me when I was took sick . . ."

"That won't amount to a great deal with her," said March wearily.

"But how we goin' to get Peters, to prove it?" asked Hope.

BECAUSE YOU DID NOT TELL ME

"We'll get him. He's camped up here somewhere. And he's within reach of supplies. Our stuff is running short. When I get up again, I'll find him. Even if we don't, I think my word is good with Bob Scott, down at Burnt Creek City."

"But I want to *see* him!" said Hope. "I want to tell him — I want to thank him for jest bein' alive."

"Sure!" exclaimed March. "And if you'll just take a walk the next time Arlis comes in, I should like to speak with her alone."

"I'm goin' now," said Hope, rising. "My gal ain't a-goin' to worry no more."

"I'd like to speak to her first," said March.

"You jest leave that to me."

And the old lumberman, anxious to bear the good news to his daughter, and feeling, in his happiness, quite able to overcome any surprise that Arlis might manifest in learning of Stephen March's errand to Whisper Lake country, shuffled across the cabin and stepped out into the winter morning.

March, picturing to himself the glad surprise at what her father would have to tell her, felt a quiet happiness for her sake, but the thought of her knowing his own errand troubled him. "Finding Slink was an accident," he soliloquized. "It

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stopped me from doing something I hated to do. I was going to take him out in the spring, even if I lost my one chance with her. But she'll never know that."

But in this, his masculine indifference to, or, perhaps, ignorance of the subtleties of the girl's heart, he was mistaken. His eyelids drooped and he dozed, to awaken as the door clicked and Arlis, her eyes wide and unseeing as a dreamer's, came slowly to him.

"Father told me," she said, looking down on him. "I wish that you had told me first."

"I wanted to, but your father could n't wait."

"Yes," she replied wistfully. "I don't know why it should — make such a difference — but it does."

"Why should it?"

There was brisk challenge in March's voice. He felt the crisis to be near and put aside all thought of subtlety in argument. True to himself he determined to be direct and, least of all, to allow his service to her and her father weigh one way or the other.

"Oh, I cared so much," she cried. "I didn't know I cared — till — now." Her hands trembled toward him and then she drew them back to her breast. "To me you were the strongest and bravest man in the world. And now —"

BECAUSE YOU DID NOT TELL ME

"I'm deputy sheriff — the other fellow."

"You can never seem the same," she continued, ignoring the tinge of bitterness in his tone. "Oh, why did n't you tell me before?"

"And give you more to worry about, little girl?"

"It would have been better."

"But your father is a free man!" said March.

She bit her lips as the warring emotions in her heart forced the tears to her eyes. "I prayed for him — every night — and God heard me. And I prayed for you, when you were with him. Oh, Stephen, can't you see? It is n't what you are or what you have done. It's because you did n't tell me . . . before . . . I cared . . . so much. . ."

"Arlis! Arlis!"

The thrill in his voice found its way to her heart. His hand stole from beneath the blankets. His unbuttoned sleeve slipped back to his elbow and she gazed at the great ripple of muscles on his bared forearm. She dropped to her knees and her arm slipped gently round his head.

"I can't help it," she whispered, the hot tears dropping slowly on her flushed cheeks. "I do care, Stephen. I do care, Stephen. You make me care."

"And I've been trying not to care — ever since I found you on the island. I think I cared for

you the first day I saw you." And he smiled gravely.

For a moment she knelt with her cheek against his, the warmth of his arm about her shoulders. Presently she drew back her head.

"Stephen, tell me, would you have taken father if you hadn't found out — that — that man was alive?"

"Yes," he answered slowly, and a frown bit deep between his brows. "I would have had to."

Misinterpreting, through the effort it cost him, his grim deliberateness for a certain dogged brutality that she could not help associating with him, she drew away and turned toward the door. Although unconscious of it, she feared the very strength of his nature that knew no middle course between "yes" and "no."

She hesitated, with one hand on the doorway. "I can't" she said, brushing a wave of hair back from her forehead. "I wanted to — care — so much. But now I can't."

A grim smile shaped his lips as the door closed. "Well," he said when she had gone; "that's not my trouble. I didn't want to; — and now I can't help it."

The ache of his wounded shoulder, unnoticed when she was with him, grew intense, and he noticed that the log fire was nearly out.

BECAUSE YOU DID NOT TELL ME

John Hope, coming in with an unwonted briskness a few minutes later, rubbed his hands together.

"Well, now I can go back — and go to work," he said, his face beaming with a light that it had not known for months.

"Well, before you go," said March drawlingly, "you might put a chunk or two on that fire. It's about out."

"Why — sure as sawlogs, that's so!"

As he poked about in the ashes, coaxing the buried embers to a flame with a roll of birch bark, March said slowly, "Is it out?"

"Nope. Plenty coals in the ashes. Arlis forgot it, I reckon." And Hope smiled knowingly. "She come mighty clost to lettin' this here fire go out."

"But . . . not . . . quite," said March in a tone that caused the old lumberman to gaze at him with questioning eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE END OF HIS ROPE

LOUIS BRITT, astride a bench, was stretching a rich-hued, red fox pelt over a thin, oval "form." The pelt in place, he ran his hand down the glossy fur. "Prime! Prime!" he said. "Hard weather, prime fur. And the price is goin' up. Hearn tell the dealers was dyein' 'em jest like silver-fox. You 're wu'th eight dollars if you 're wu'th totin' out."

He hung the "form" on a peg and turned to a second pelt. "You ain't so good," he said. "Bitch-fox and poor."

Occasionally he glanced through the dim, single pane of glass just level with his eyes as he sat at work.

"More snow comin' to-night, top of the crust, too. Bad fer us, but the black-cat 'll be out diggin' fer pa'tridge, and so 'll the fox. Funny how them pa'tridge gets friz under the crust an' keep alive. Wonder if Slink 's gone nutty ag'in and gone larrupin' over to shake han's with ole man Hope? Ast me t' other day if I thunk he 'd get

THE END OF HIS ROPE

arrested if he went back home. Home! All the home he's got is a heap of cinders under four foot of snow, over in Free River Valley. He ain't countin' this as home, lately. Actin' more like a fella boardin' to a farmhouse at hayin'-time. Jest waitin' for the sun in the barn an' then, so-long folks. But he's too sca'ded to quit me, I reckon. Wants to an' that's the way in this here world. Take care of a fella and nuss him and feed him liquor when he's upshot by thinkin' too much, and then he turns around an' says, 'suthin''s wrong.' I never got no thanks yet for bein' white to a fella.

He hung the second form beside the first, filled his pipe, and throwing a short, unsplit chunk of white birch on the fire, sat moodily contemplating the square of window-glass.

"Don't like the looks of that big fella down to Hope's camp. Seen him prowlin' mighty clus' to our south line last week. Wonder who he is? Never seen him down to Free River camp. Fren' of Hope's, mebby. Well, Hope need 'em."

His ruminating gaze brightened as he looked through the window again.

"Here comes Slink now, and he's runnin'. Now what in Buell Caounty's sca'ded him?"

Over the soundless winter afternoon a faint "L-o-o-ie! L-o-o-ie!" reiterated, and grew

louder till Britt arose disgustedly and ambled to the door.

"Git lost and jest found ye ain't?" he growled as Peters, gasping out a rush of incoherent exclamations, clattered into the cabin, snowshoes and all.

"That's what did it," he said, stalking to his bunk and hiding the rifle beneath the browse. "He was tryin' to ketch me. It's a jedgment, Looie. I ain't a jedgment no more."

"Play-actin' ag'in?" said Britt. "Mebby you're goin' to take them snowshoes to bed with you too."

"*He* did n't have none," said Peters wildly.

"No?" said Britt. "Reckon he were a angel an' had wings."

Peters, glancing round the cabin, drew a step nearer to his companion. "I killed him, Looie. Strike me dead, I killed him."

"Well, you jest take off them snowshoes and set down and quit runnin' round this here shack."

As Peters complied to the extent of unlacing his racquettes and hanging them on a peg near the door, Britt asked him gruffly, but with evident disbelief in Peters's attitude of real terror, who had frightened him.

"The big fella," replied Slink. "Over in the

THE END OF HIS ROPE

deer-yard. I was n't meanin' to hurt him. I was sca'ed he'd ketch me. I was n't aimin' at him."

In short, half-unintelligible phrases, illustrated by a jerky pantomime, he described his meeting with March, and as he continued he quieted to the extent of recalling much of the conversation, hindered, however, rather than helped by an impatient effort on Britt's part to find out what had really happened. "He said I was Slink Peters," concluded the gum-picker. "Said I was to come an' tell *him* that I was n't dead."

"He did, hey?" Britt's sullen face twisted in shallow sarcasm. He was beginning to believe his companion's story. "Well, Slink," he continued, "I guess you done it this trip. You're gettin' to be a whole lot of comfort to me in my ole aige, you be. Reckon you know we got to get out of here now? Do you understan' what *killin'* means? Killin' a man?"

"Where we goin'?" asked Peters. "Where *kin* we go, Looie?"

"Well, I was n't thinkin' of goin' m'self. An' we ain't goin' now. You set down and quit runnin' around this shack like a hungry bob-cat. Nobody's comin' after you *now*. If you did plug the big fella, *he* ain't. And I reckon John Hope ain't able — or the gal. But they'll be wonderin'

why he don't git back. If John Hope gits to lookin' around and runs onto our line and follows it up and finds this here camp, he ain't a-goin' to find you and me a-waitin' fer him ag'in."

"We ain't done nuthin' to *him*, Looie."

"Oh, no. We ain't done a thing!" And Britt laughed. "But I'm goin' over to the 'yard' to look, to-morrow. And I'm goin' to tote in that fur that you got sca'ed out of bringin' back."

The following afternoon, Britt, his cap and shoulders white with a sheath of loose, heavy snow, stamped into the cabin and flung the stiff, snow-powdered shapes of a red fox and several marten to the floor. He shook the wet snow from his cap and turned to Peters, who was bending over a pile of pelts.

"Well, Slink," he said, eyeing the fur, "you done a dam' poor job. From what I seen you must have nailed him, but not fer keeps. Seen where they was two pair of snowshoes been standing in the crust, in that bunch of firs west of the 'yard.' *Two*, do you hear? An' some blood on the crust. Now we got to git out."

"I'm goin', Looie," said Slink abjectly. "You ain't mad at me, be you, Looie?"

"Goin' where?"

"I dunno. But I reckon I'm goin' where they can't ketch me."

THE END OF HIS ROPE

"What you doin', sortin' them furs?" And Britt pointed to the floor.

"Them's your'n and them's mine, Looie. I give you the best ones."

Britt scowled. "Dividin' 'em up, hey?" Then he laughed with a pretense at good humor. "All right, Slink. But I'm goin' likewise. You need n't have been in such a hurry dividin' up."

"I'm goin' *now*," exclaimed Peters.

His companion checked an impulse to speak as a better way of serving his interests occurred to him. Instead, he hung his Mackinaw, beaded with glittering drops of melting snow, on a peg, and climbed to the low half-loft of the cabin. He pawed over several dim bundles and finally dropped from the loft to the floor with a flat, shiny object partly concealed in his hand. Unnoticed by Peters, who was industriously cording the pelts, he slid the object beneath the blankets of his own bunk. "Got to do it quick," he muttered. "He's like to mosey off most any time now and give the whole thing away."

They worked until late that afternoon, overhauling the packs and gathering together what few utensils and supplies they thought necessary for their contemplated journey to Beaseley. "There," Britt told Peters, "they would strike north for Canada."

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

After their evening meal, Britt, assuming an easy air, said: "We'll come back and tote out what's left, some day. And seein' it's our last night in the ole camp, I'm a-goin' to treat."

"You said you ain't got none, fer a long time, Looie."

"Well, I been savin' a leetle jest in case you got took bad. How's this?"

He stepped to his bunk and drew out the flask he had recently concealed there. Reaching across the table for Peters's tin cup, he set about the task of stupefying the half-witted gum-picker. With malicious shrewdness, he poured but a taste of the undiluted alcohol into the cup.

"This is a 'split,' Slink. The real ole hide-stretcher. Put lots of water in her."

Peters filled the cup with water and tilted his head.

"I can't taste nuthin', Looie. You ain't foolin' me, be you?"

"Foolin' ye? They was a good three fingers of the real old stuff in that cup. You wait till she gits to workin'."

"I can taste it a *leetle*," said Peters, smacking his lips.

"Sure you kin. Well, here's lookin', Slink." And Britt mixed a careful potation for himself and drank it. "Have another?"

THE END OF HIS ROPE

Slink nodded.

This time Britt reversed the process and emptied a good half of the flask of alcohol in Peters's cup, pretending to fill it with water. He handed the cup to the gum-picker. "There you be, Slink. Drink her down."

Peters again tilted the cup and swallowed the contents at a gulp. He tried to speak, but the burning fluid had, for an instant, paralyzed his throat. "It burns!" he gasped at last.

His face paled and he plunged the cup into the water-pail and drank again and again.

Britt, laughing, stepped to the door and hurled the flask far out in the snow. "None of that fer mine," he muttered; "I got to travel."

Peters arose dizzily from the table and walked across to the doorway.

"Where you goin'?" said Britt, barring the way with his arm. "Snowin' yet," he added casually. "Did you taste her that time?"

The gum-picker gazed at him dully, then turned and walked back to the table. He sat on the bench staring at the figure of his companion.

"Looie," he muttered; "Looie, I feel sick."

"You're all right, Slink. Want to git in your bunk?"

Peters's head nodded and slipped forward.

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

He recovered himself with a jerk. His eyelids flickered over a thin rim of glassy eyeball. Britt took his arm and dragged him to his feet. "That's her!" he said with an assumption of geniality. He tipped the gum-picker bodily into the bunk and, without covering him, set about re-sorting the packs of furs, which he finally corded into one bundle. This he placed near the door with his pack, axe, rifle, and snowshoes. Freshening the fire, he methodically mixed and baked a few biscuits and fried some meat.

"This here's about the end of my rope," he said, gazing about the cabin. "I'm through with takin' care of crazy folks. He kin stay and do his own explainin'." Then he rolled up in his blankets and slept.

CHAPTER XXVII

A TRAIL OUT

VEILED in a dizzying swirl of snowflakes, two figures plodded heavily through the clogging drifts of the February storm that roared in the high tree-tops of the forest east of Whisper Lake. The taller of the two men broke trail, his companion shuffling after him with short, labored strides. Muffled and clumsy marionettes they seemed, as they clicked across a barren background of gaunt, brown shafts thrust into a smothering sea of white. Somewhere beyond the blank of the colorless sky burned the morning sun, emphasizing in its viewless indefiniteness of half-light, the bleak desolation of the winter woodlands. The tree-trunks, the outcropping, riven stump, the shivering fox-tails of the young firs, half-buried in the snow, the men themselves seemed but unreal fragments of a restless dream, tangible only when a lull in the storm held them instantly distinct, to vanish, phantom-like, in a writhing shroud of obliteration. He who broke trail frequently paused to scan the indistinct blaze on a

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

pine or spruce, while his companion, breathing heavily, peered from beneath his mufflings toward the dim outline of some farther tree endeavoring to "line" the blaze through the blinding streaks of white. Neither spoke, but working from tree to tree, dodged across the ridge back of the lake and on out to the low sweep of vast white enchantment — the thinly timbered barren that lay around the deer-yard. Finally, within its low, tree-walled shelter, they slackened pace and cast about, still moving eastward. The shorter of the two figures called to his companion, who turned and came back to him. "Here 's the line," he said.

The other, following his glance to a hewn sapling slanted against a cedar, nodded, and they swung toward the north. An hour of steady going and the snow-banked logs of Britt's cabin loomed dully through the clustered trees.

"Funny thing — no smoke," said he who broke trail.

His companion grunted and they plodded on. Beneath the sheltering trees the snow fell lazily. The cabin, its roof heavy with a rounded ridge of white, its door closed and sealed waist-high in a drift, gave forth no sign of being inhabited.

"I'd go slow," said the shorter of the two men. "He plugged you once —"

A TRAIL OUT

He was interrupted by his companion, who stepped to the door and thumped on it with his mittened fist. Receiving no reply to his summons he braced his shoulder and knee against the door and shoved. It creaked and sprung slightly, but did not give. "I'm too sore to break it in, John," he said. "You put your shoulder against it. Now." The door gave inward with a crash. The shorter of the two men fell full length, but the other, saving himself, kicked off his snowshoes and stepped inside. Slowly the half-light thinned and the interior took outline. In the dead, palpable silence there came the whisper of a movement, and Slink Peters, crouched against the farther wall, glared at the intruders, one hand against the wall, the other outstretched and trembling.

"Don't you tetch me," he said hoarsely. "I ain't done nuthin'."

John Hope, clattering across the cabin, drew off his cap.

"God forgive me!" he cried. "God forgive me! Slink Peters, you know me?"

The gum-picker, flattening himself against the logs, gazed with helpless terror at the pitted face.

"It's *him*!" he said finally. "You been sick."

Hope nodded. "Yes, Slink. But findin' you's cured me, I reckon."

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

Stephen March, glancing round the cabin asked where Britt was.

"Looie? Looie?" crooned Peters. "Looie, he's gone."

"Well, damn *him*. And he left you here to starve." March choked as the heat of his anger burned in his throat. "You poor busted son-of-a-gun."

John Hope, strangely unlike his usual sturdy self, faltered before the cringing gum-picker.

"Slink," he said timorously, "won't you shake hands?"

Something in his tone and attitude, perhaps the absolute submission of his will to the creature he had so nearly destroyed, touched a responsive chord in the gum-picker's heart. Slowly the gaunt figure drew up, the lean shoulders straightened and his hand went forth. March despite his indignation at Britt's desertion of Peters, could not repress a smile as the gum-picker took Hope's extended hand and said earnestly: "Don't you be afeared of me, John Hope. I'm your friend, I am."

March knelt before the warped and rusted sheet-iron stove and kindled a fire.

"John," he said over his shoulder, "better bring in some wood. My arm isn't working right yet."

A TRAIL OUT

As Hope went out for the wood, March drew off his cap and tossed it on the bunk. The gum-picker, following Hope to the door, turned as the latter came in with an armful of snow-crusted wood. He saw March's face closely for the first time. A gleam of intelligence lightened his dull eyes.

"I wasn't meanin' to do it," he said, referring to the shooting. "I was n't aimin' at you."

"You did pretty well for a snap-shot," said March. "How long since you've had anything to eat?"

"I was waitin' fer Looie," said Peters, gesturing toward a chunk of meat and some scorched camp-bread. "Did you jest come back from lookin' fer Looie, over to Beaseley—?"

"Beaseley!"

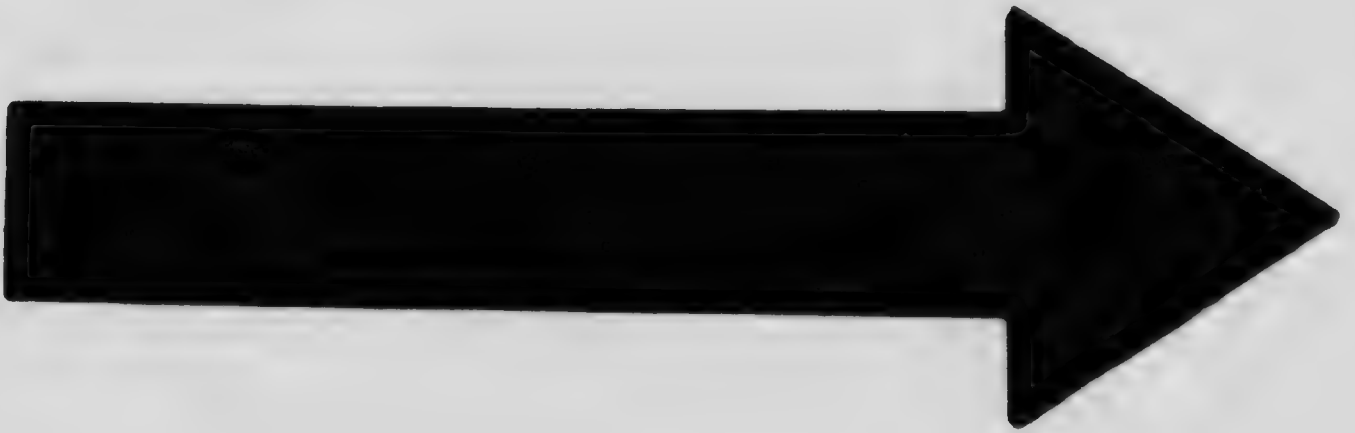
Peters started back at Hope's exclamation.

"Why, that's over near the Canada line," continued Hope. "Did n't know you could get into this country from Beaseley."

Peters nodded knowingly. "Me an' Looie come from Beaseley. We done our tradin' to Beaseley. Looie he's been gone nigh on to a month now. I ain't got no matches since yesterday."

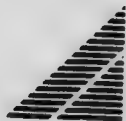
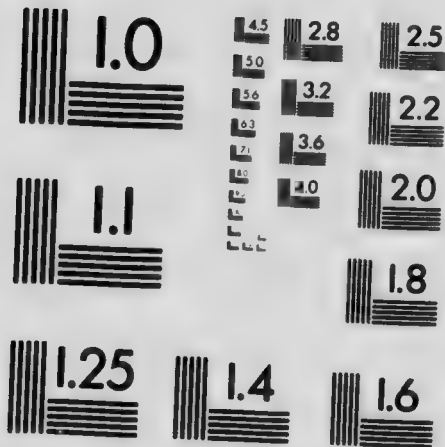
March and Hope looked at each other.

"And Britt skipped out and left you?" said Hope. "Why did he leave?"



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"I dunno," replied Peters. "He took all the fur an' most all the matches. I was goin' to Beaseley an' git some, mebby. I'm thinkin' mebby Looie got lost and is froze to death."

"Don't you believe it," said March. "He got tired of the game. Well, he has saved himself some trouble. Now, Slink, we'll see that you get back to Free River all right. Where is your flour?"

"There," said Peters, indicating a half-barrel in the corner.

"We've got to take a little till we can get to Beaseley and stock up. You got plenty here?"

Peters nodded. "Is *she* hungry?" he asked.

John Hope smiled. "Not yet, but we were getting pretty short of flour. Something must have happened to Jean," he added, turning to March. "But now we've found Slink and a way out of this country, I can commence *livin'* again. God, man!" he exclaimed turning to Peters, "but I'm mighty glad I found you."

"John Hope what killed a man," said Peters amiably. "That's who you be. But I ain't goin' to tell 'em."

March, mixing a flour-and-water batter, began to fry some pancakes and boil water. Later the three men sat down to a meal which all of them needed.

A TRAIL OUT

When they had finished eating, Peters asked: "Is she waitin' fer you?"

March nodded.

"I ain't sca'ed of her!" said the gum-picker.

"Then you better help tote some of this grub over to our camp," said Hope, anxious to keep his eye on the erratic gum-picker until they should leave for the settlements. "Do you know the trail out?"

"Me an' Looie know. But I got to wait fer Looie. He'd be mad if I did n't wait."

"See here, Slink," said March. "You forget Britt. He skipped out and left you. He won't come back. He was bound to give you the worst of it some day, for he's that kind. Now you come to Free River with us. I think John, here, will see that you get a job and I'll see that you are n't bothered."

"You won't do nuthin' to me?" asked Peters, appealing to Hope, who stood gazing at the floor with brows drawn down and arms akimbo.

The old lumberman started. "You? Do nuthin'? No, nuthin' excep' all I can to make up for what I did a'ready."

"That's her!" said Peters, unconsciously quoting Britt. "Me an' you and him's partners, hey?"

March, who was overhauling the stock of supplies, laughed.

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

"Partners it is, Slink. We're all mixed up in this thing now. You get into your coat and we'll go to our camp."

Peters, momentarily pleased with the idea, slipped into his Mackinaw while March gave him a pack to carry, and gave Hope another. His own shoulder would not bear the tug of the pack-straps. Outside the cabin, as they turned to retrace their trail to the trap-line, Peters, who followed, called a halt and insisted that he knew a much shorter route to Whisper Lake. Although mentally unstable, he was keen at woodcraft.

In the gray of the winter afternoon, with a stinging wind lashing the blank surface of the snow to scintillating clouds, the three figures plodded down the long vista of brown pillared monotony, the gum-picker in the lead, tall, gaunt, nervously active. Behind him March swung along easily, his keen glance noting the characteristics of the new trail. John Hope, his short, burly figure swathed in whirling white, trudged heavily after, jaws set, and every muscle straining to keep pace with his companions. Despite his efforts the others drew slowly away from him, until March, missing the click of his racquettes, spoke to Peters.

As they waited for Hope to overtake them, Peters, with one of his quaint turns of mind, said

A TRAIL OUT

suddenly: "I ain't scared of *her*. She's like angels."

"Well, if angels have lots of spunk, and walk around pretending they don't see you when they want to see you — and get hungry, just like all of us, then, perhaps —" He hesitated, for he had been talking half to himself. "Yes, you're correct, Slink."

All of which Slink Peters agreed to with many nods and a sage expression of deep understanding.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOPE'S RETURN

THE dank earth steamed in the white light of the April sun. Here and there a pale-green edge of lichen peeped through the melting snow that capped thinly the stumps and boulders. Along the tote-roads leading to Free River lumber-camps, pools of glistening snow-water lay in the low pitches. Between the pebbly ridges of old tire-ruts a hundred tiny rivulets gleamed like twisted silver threads. Winter gave way sullenly before the tide of spring, retreating deeper and deeper into the forest, where, beneath the sunless northern shoulders of the hills, it held a desolate and mimic court. Matted and frozen patches of pine needles still lay white-edged with snow and a thin mist hung close to the ground in the chill shadows of moss-draped bole and stump. The raw air, heavy with the smell of decaying leaves, bore a faint suggestion of awakening spring as the light breezes rustled through the sleepy branches. Free River, booming past the Hope-Townsend camps, bore on its quickening flood blotches of snow-laden brush,

HOPE'S RETURN

dead trees, and strips of glistening bark. Clots of muddy foam, loosed from the turning driftwood, slid wavering across the river in the quick puffs of wind that ran down the shores and touched the muddy current in long slanting fans.

The overflow from the northern hills, swelling the broad reaches of the river, crowded the slow eddies farther and farther up the sweating mudbanks, where, circling with their freight of log and branch and twig, they lapped at the crumbling earth. Lump after lump, tugged from the shores, sank and disappeared, until the water was thick with particles of dissolving clay.

In the lumber-camps, worn moccasins were tossed aside and the crunch of caulked boots, gnawing a deeper rut in the barrel-stave runway between bunk-house and cook-room, suggested the coming activities of the spring drive. The winter's cut of spruce had been heavy, and for that reason Townsend, aside from a natural solicitude for his partner, wished that the older man were with him. The letter from Arlis, telling of Richard Baird's drowning in Whisper River, of her father's sickness, and of Stephen March's presence at their camp, had all but decided Townsend to return to Whisper Lake with Big Jean. Then came word that the Frenchman,

while resting at his own camp above Pleasant Lake, had met with an accident — had laid his foot open with an axe and would not be able to travel again for months, perhaps never. Townsend had immediately sent a team to Free River Settlement, which DuBois had managed to reach with the assistance of Baptiste. From the settlement he was immediately taken to the hospital at Burnt Creek City. The Frenchman was still in the hospital, fighting with his splendid vigor and clean blood the threatened blood-poisoning. So Townsend gave up all idea of making the journey and turned to the work in hand, realizing that March's presence with Arlis and her father would assure them of a livelihood at least.

As Townsend stood in the doorway of the wangan office, one of his down-river men clumped up the path and handed him a bundle of papers and letters. Townsend nodded and tossed the mail to the clerk. He heard the snap of a breaking string and the clerk was at his elbow.

"Looks like John's handwriting," he said.

The lumberman tore the letter open. "It is!" he exclaimed, glancing at the date and signature. "Johnny, old John's alive, and down at Burnt Creek City!"

He scanned the letter hurriedly. "Got out all right. Arlis is well and Steve March is with them.

HOPE'S RETURN

Well, Johnny," he continued, "I don't care a whoop in hell now whether school keeps or not. That million feet we cut can rot till I get back. I'm going down to Burnt Creek to see old John."

The clerk, surprised at his employer's unusual and eloquent outburst, grinned amiably. "I'm mighty glad, Brent," he said heartily. "And I guess you're mighty glad John's out of trouble, and is coming back on the job again."

"You bet!" said Townsend, re-reading the letter. "Hello! Slink Peters — up on Whisper Lake — came out as far as Beaseley — then disappeared again. Well, scorch his old socks! Sounds like John was dreamin'. Say, Johnny, you hitch up them buckskins. I'm going to Burnt Creek on the jump."

An hour later, as Townsend clattered down the rocky tote-road behind a team that was seemingly trying to jerk the light body of the buckboard from its dancing wheels, he drew up to let one of his tote-teams pass. As the heavy-tired wagon, grinding over the uneven road, drew nearer, Townsend leaped down, and flinging the lines aside, ran toward the oncoming wagon. Then, as if ashamed of his exuberance, and bethinking himself of the horses, left without hitching, he turned and walked back toward his own team.

"Hey!" yelled the teamster of the wagon ;
"they're goin'."

He put it mildly. The buckskins, freed from the voice and hand of their driver, whirled, the buckboard careened, and with heels flying wide in a rattling trot, they started back for camp. As Townsend called, the trot grew to a wild gallop. The buckboard swung from side to side of the road, bounced against a stump with a crash and a single wheel staggered across the road, wobbled, and fell turning. A distant volleying of hoofs, another crash, and Townsend turned as the other team drew up. John Hope, clambering from the wagon, dropped to the ground and held out his short, broad hand.

Townsend grinning like a schoolboy grasped the extended hand. "John!" he said, gazing at the other's scarred and pitted face.

"Celebratin'?" queried Hope, his deep-set blue eyes twinkling.

"Sent 'em back to let the boys know we're comin'. Goahead, Jimmy," he continued, motioning to the teamster; "we'll walk."

When the team had disappeared round a bend in the road, Townsend stepped to the broken wheel and stood it beside a stump.

"We cut a million feet this winter," he said, facing his partner.

HOPE'S RETURN

"Good! How's Number 14 makin' it?"

"Pretty fair. The Wing crew got the lead and kept it. All the boys have been doin' fine."

Between Townsend's naked statement and Hope's exclamation lay a world of understanding. Each knew the other's thought and each appreciated the other's terseness. Later they would talk at length . . .

Not until they had come upon the wrecked wagon did either speak again.

As Townsend inspected the result of his carelessness, he asked: "How's Arlis?"

"Healthy, and black as an Indian. And say, Brent, that man March, Steve March, he's some leather!"

Step by step Hope recounted the days of their isolation and hardship. He told of having seen Big Jean at the hospital while in Burnt Creek City and dwelt at length on the advent of the gum-picker at Whisper Lake; how he had guided them to Beaseley and had again disappeared the night before they took the stage for the railroad. Through all his narrative ran a bright thread of praise for Stephen March, — a thread that became so interwoven with his theme that Townsend finally said, as the old lumberman concluded: —

"You have n't said much about yourself, John."

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

It's been all March and Arlis and Peters. Did you have any trouble with Bob Scott at Burnt Creek?"

"Not trouble, exactly, Brent, but Bob and me had a talk. He agreed to hold back and take March's word and my word for it that Slink was alive and kickin'. That's the worst of it, Brent. Now, my gal Arlis sets a lot of store by Steve, but she won't let on. Now young March says he's goin' in to Whisper Lake ag'in and get Slink out this time or bust. You see, Arlis and Steve was gettin' what you might say in love with each other up there, when she found out he'd come in to get me and that busted the whole thing. She did n't seem to think that he had his work to do same as you and me. Well, I ain't sayin' nothin', but I know Arlis thinks a heap of him, howbe she's pertendin' she don't. And Steve, he's jest one of them stubborn cusses that's too good to even pretend he don't care, and that's where I figure he's makin' a mistake. Arlis is some stubborn likewise, and when he come over to the hotel to tell us that he was goin' in again after Slink, and to say good-bye, she jest up and says that it would n't make any difference to her whether he got Slink or not, so far as she was personally concerned, or suthin' like that. She said it too sassy to be real, for her.

HOPE'S RETURN

He jest laughed, kind of hard like and said nothin', but the way he looked at her was a whole pile of talk. When he was gone, then Arlis she cried. Tell you what, Brent, I feel my troubles was jest commencin' again."

Townsend plodded silently beside his partner, his long, weathered face grave, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his coat. Presently, as they came to another piece of the wrecked buckboard, he stopped.

"'T ain't for me to say it, John. But I've got to, just once. I'm thinking of Dick, my sister's boy."

Hope raised his hand as if to expostulate, but the other continued.

"I want to say this so I won't be keepin' it ag'in you, John. Dick is gone. He went into that country against my wishes, because he liked Arlis and wanted to help all he could. I've learnt something this winter besides how to handle four camps alone. You started in to clean out Slink Peters's rum-selling and a big pile of trouble come to you for tryin' to do the right thing, by goin' at it the wrong way. Then Arlis took the same chance that drowned Dick, to get to see you. Big Jean, he took a chance every time he run that river. Then you took sick. You wouldn't, if you 'd been here. I ain't sayin' no-

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

thin' of the Indian and Little Jules. They was workin' for wages the same as all of us, but Big Jean was workin' for more than I could ever pay him or you either." He hesitated and tossed a part of the broken pole of the buckboard into the bushes. "The whole thing has been just like this here runaway. The start wasn't so much, but when they got agoin' they strung things along and like as not are stringin' themselves to flinders yet. Now if that team runs into somebody, it'll be my fault if they're twenty miles from here. You're older than me and your money is runnin' this here camp, but if I did n't say just what was in my mind *now*, I'd be thinkin' a whole lot less of myself — and you."

"Brent," said the other, lifting his head and gazing at Townsend's grave face, "I paid for what I done to Slink a hundred times over. Look at me! Why, my gal kin hardly stand it — though she don't let on — to kiss me good-night. I know there's some things a man can't never pay for and there's somethin' bigger than us has got to take care of them things. It's like a concern borrowin' capital to work with. Most of 'em does. If the concern's square and pays the interest, they can borrow and get along somehow. But there's got to be bigger things behind the concern to let 'em live. I ain't much on religion, Brent,

HOPE'S RETURN

but if I didn't *know* they was somethin' back of folks that's done wrong, to take care of what they can't make up for, I'd just as soon be dead, up on Whisper Lake."

"John," said Townsend, stretching forth his long arm and placing his hand on Hope's shoulder, "I'll stand by my share of *that* interest, same as you. We're partners, and it'll take more trouble than what you been through to bust that. Besides," he added, smiling, "we've got enough work ahead getting that drive down-river to make us forget that we're alive."

CHAPTER XXIX

"JUST FOR THE NEED OF YOU"

IN the depths of the forest twinkled lacy patches of pale green as the budding foliage of early June grew vigorous and fragrant. Maples, beeches, yellow and white birches against the heavier coloring of the conifers, and standing apart, were veritable vignettes, etched upon the elusive background of changing light that paled and glowed in mystic sequences. The rusty mosses of early spring brightened to vivid emerald, and wee, seedling hemlocks and pines sprouted bravely in the shadows of their giant sires. The hill-top firs spread clouds of dusky blue against a cloudless sky. The fresh, clean vigor of renewed growth glistened in the smooth golden round of the yellow birches, crowned by the delicate intricacy of penciled branches reaching out to black threadlike twigs, gay with the glitter of sun-washed leaves. These curled nothings unfolded in the warmth — miniatures, in their almost imperceptible serrations, of their future, boldly notched gracefulness. Amber spheres of gum hung like polished beads against the rich brown of the

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ragged bark. Barren winter sulked in the fastness of the Polar seas and the living woodlands bloomed in an ecstasy of warm sunlight and blithe winds.

A red fox, glossy of coat, slipped shadow-like through the subdued harmony, and leaping to a fallen timber, trotted down its length and stood sniffing the light breeze. Out of the shadowy over-world of branches came the faint *qweet! qweet!* of a spruce partridge, viewless in its brown immobility. The fox lifted its head, its pointed muzzle twitching.

Down near the river trail a lynx basked, with half-closed eyes, stretched and arose sinuously, and reaching upward with its broad, heavy fore-paws, drew its ripping claws down the bark of a scored cedar, playfully, in the sheer joy of being alive. On a distant pond a loon called, and another called, the weird cadence of their laughter running in faint reiterations along the shores. The red fox, twisting his head and looking backward, dropped suddenly from the log into the ferns beneath. The fern-tops wavered and were still. The great lynx bounded upward to a limb, caught it, and writhed to a furry shadow in the spreading green. Then came the scuff of a moccasined foot on the trail and presently a deep chant awoke the utter silence:—

STEPHEN MARCH'S WAY

"Flambeau, Lestang, DuBois, LaRue;
Leet' mans, beeg mans, rivaire mans h'all.
Hah! Dat longue batteau and dat light canoe . . ."

And Big Jean, crossing a pool of sunlight, limped along the trail toward Free River. He paused as he came opposite the tree where the lynx had been. "Ah mak' to get you sometaime, Ah t'ink," he said, grinning and examining the bark of the cedar. He glanced up into the tree and passed on down the trail. "Mees Arlees she say to moi, dat Ah come to dees place an' den she haf to say somet'ing to moi. Ah t'ink eet ees dat beeg Marrch, by Gar, dat he don' come back." He chuckled. "Mees Arlees, mabbe, she wan' for to see Jean DuBois, but Ah t'ink she wan' for see dat Marrch more dan dat. But Ah come."

The trail, meandering through the woods, straggled out to a point on the river, below the lumber-camp. DuBois walked slowly, his usual stride broken by the limp. He came to the low rocky point, and before Arlis, who stood looking down the river, could greet him, Button trotted toward him, and, seemingly overjoyed at seeing a friend, darted back and forth excitedly.

"Dat leet' chien he don' forget Jean DuBois," he said by way of greeting.

Arlis, her brown eyes wide with the gaze of one who has looked long on the vast of the unbounded

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hills, smiled. Now that Jean had come to her, she found it difficult to speak of that which was in her heart.

DuBois, with a shrewdness which had often amused her, and which now sent the rich blood pulsing beneath the dusky olive of her cheeks, anticipated her thought. She took no offense at his directness, appreciating the spirit which prompted it.

"You wan' talk a leet' veet moi 'bout dat Mo'-sieur Marrch, Ah t'ink."

"I'm glad to see you well and up again, Jean."

"Ah know dat. You h'always glad to see Beeg Jean. You know Ah t'ink h'of dat taime w'en you vas leet' bêbê, an' Ah tek' you for ride een de snow an' you fall h'out dat sleigh een de snow. Your père he say to moi dat you one beeg full-hand to wan' go h'all taime."

"Handful, Jean. And I did want to go all the time, I remember," she said, laughing.

"W'en you leet' fille you say w'at you t'ink to Jean DuBois. Now, Ah t'ink you don' say w'at you t'ink h'all taime." He sighed lugubriously, and shook his head. "Ah t'ink you ma bêbê jus' same h'always."

"Of course I am, Jean. Don't I always come to you when I need help? And you always help me."

"Oui. Dat ees right."

"Do you think he will come back?" she asked presently.

"If he know dat you wait for heem, Ah t'ink he come vair' qveek back," replied DuBois.

"But he's been gone two months. He may have been—" The girl hesitated to speak that which she thought.

"Mabbe he don' fin' dat Sleenk Petaire firs' t'ing, so qveek. Dat Sleenk he hide, mabbe."

"But, Jean,—I want to know"—and she stepped to him and put her hand on his arm—"if he don't come—soon, could you get some one at Free River to go in and find out—"

"Oui!" replied DuBois heartily; "Ah go."

"No. Not you. Your foot, Jean—"

"Dat foot she go vair' good," said DuBois, extending his moccasin and wriggling his toes. "Ah 'm h'all tire' of dat Burnt Creek."

"I know father will let you leave your place at the Wing camp, to go, but I won't let you. I shouldn't have asked as much as I have."

The Frenchman, facing the river, smiled suddenly. Arlis, absorbed in her own thought, failed to notice his quick glance and the smile that spread over his dark face.

"Mabbe Ah don' go," he said mysteriously.

Again he looked down the river, turning away as her glance met his.

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"What is it?" she said, shading her eyes from the sun-glare on the water.

Far down the gleaming river a gray dot moved to the faint silver flash of swinging paddles. One second the dot was distinct; another and it blended with the smoky shore-line as some distant point crept round behind the boat as it approached. DuBois, cupping his hands, sent forth a sounding "Hallo!" that throbbed over the broad level of the stream, to meet an answering hail from the little craft. Arlis, wide-eyed and eager, leaned forward, one hand upon a great rock that rose beside her and rounded to the level of her shoulder. She seemed again, in her happy expectancy, the child that DuBois had known a few years past, when he, of all the men in the camp, was her chosen companion and guardian. He looked long at her bright face and smiled. "She wan leet' bête," he murmured. "An' she lof' dat Marrch. Ah know!"

Silently they watched the canoe draw near till the lean frame of the gum-picker, seated in the bow and paddling vigorously, became distinct. Behind him the broad shoulders of another man swung to a stroke that lifted light feathery waves from the bow of the craft. Nearer still and the watchers could discern the gaunt, weather-browed features of Stephen March, as he gazed

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past his companion toward the point on which they stood.

Big Jean, stooping suddenly, caught up Arlis and lifted her to the rock, where she chided him, laughing as March swung the canoe inshore.

Slink Peters, straightening his bent shoulders, lifted his paddle and pointed toward her.

"Angels!" he exclaimed, grinning. "I ain't sca'ed of *her*."

"Sure!" replied March. "But you needn't upset the canoe."

As the boat grounded on the rocks, Peters arose and stepped stiffly to shore. March, walking to the bow, stepped out and drew the boat from the water. The greeting that was on his lips passed away in silence as he gazed at the girl. She had come to meet him? That could not be, for how did she know where he was or when he would return?

"Hola! Sleenk!" said DuBois. "How you make heem?"

Peters, staring at the girl, turned and took the Frenchman's proffered hand limply.

"Where's John Hope?" he asked, glancing from one to the other.

"Father's at the camp," said Arlis. "He is expecting you, Mr. Peters."

The gum-picker nodded sagely. He seemed

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entirely at home amid his surroundings and carried himself with a steadiness and ease that contrasted strangely with his former erratic bearing.

"Your dad's goin' to give me a job," he said; "Steve March says so. I'm goin' to quit pickin' gum and go to lumberin'."

"You come veet moi?" said DuBois. "Monsieur 'Ope he say for me to come an' breeng you to de camp."

The Frenchman lied superbly, displaying an insight that would have been termed "tact" in higher circumstances.

"He'll go with you, Jean," said March. "Slink's feeling a whole lot better these days. How is your foot, Jean?"

"Foot? She go vair' good, Ah t'ink."

The two men shook hands silently. For a second DuBois hesitated, glancing at Arlis, and in his glance was all the kindness and well-wishing of his big heart. Then he motioned to Peters and presently March and the girl were standing alone, he with an amused smile twinkling in his keen eyes, she looking gravely down upon him from the rock.

"How are you going to get down?" he asked.

"Oh, easily enough. I'll jump."

Looking up at her as she stood, bareheaded in

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the sunlight, he held out his arms. She shook her head.

"No, Stephen, not until you've forgiven me — everything."

"It would take a lifetime to do that," he said. "And I can't wait that long. There's nothing —"

"Yes, there is, Stephen. And you *must* listen. If I came down now — you'd just make me promise to not say a word." Then lightly, "You see I'm not afraid of you up here."

"Afraid — of — me?"

"Just a little. But you would n't understand it. I did n't realize, up there on Whisper Lake, how far I had grown away from myself. Since you've been gone I've thought about it all, and now I understand that you *had* to keep your promise to Mr. Scott and to yourself. I think that if I had lived up there much longer I should have become almost a savage. It is terrible to think of — it was terrible, our living so far from people. I love the woods, but I cannot love them as I did once. You never broke a promise, did you?" she asked presently.

"That's pretty hard to answer, right away. I *have* broken promises to myself, but not to any one else. I never made many."

"Would you have kept your word to Mr. Scott,

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if I had begged you not to — do what you intended doing?"

March, gazing across the river, frowned.

"I think so," he said gravely.

"And you cared for me?"

"Cared?" he cried. "Oh, Arlis, that is n't the word. Come down," and he reached out his arms, "and I'll tell you in the only way I can."

She drew up her hands and clasped them beneath her chin, gazing at him wistfully.

"Do you really love me — now?" she asked.

"Love?" he said slowly. "Perhaps you understand love differently than I do. It's just a name, I think, for something we don't understand ourselves. I won't pretend that I know. But I do know that I want you. That I think of you every day and every night. That my arms ache just for the need of you to fill them. I carried you in my arms once — and since then — But I can't explain. I'm strong, and I've lived clean, and I should want my children to have hair like yours and eyes like yours . . ."

He hesitated as he saw her eyes fill with tears. Her hands clenched and then opened slowly. Stepping to the edge of the rock she stretched forth her arms.

"Then, Stephen, why don't you take me?"

At her quick smile he strode forward and she

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slipped down, closing her eyes as she felt his strong arms about her, thrilled as her parted lips felt the gentle strength of his caress.

DuBois, coming silently along the trail, saw the glint of her hair against the faded blue of March's flannel shirt. He raised his arm toward a rift of sky that lay like a far lake outlined by the wavering branches. "Ah h'ask le bon Dieu to mak' de sun shine laik' dat on ma leet' bêbê h'always." Then he turned away, blindly groping along the trail, that grew distinct in sun-patch and shadow as the mist of happiness passed from his eyes.

THE END

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